

btb

books through bars

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Books Through Bars – Our Family’s Story

By Nora Loughry and Leah Morris



It started for our family (Justin Loughry, Leah Morris and our daughter Nora Loughry) with a listing in the newspaper for an exhibit of art created by prisoners. We were intrigued, so we visited the Contexts exhibit, where we saw many moving sketches, drawings and paintings made by inmates from around the country. It was there that we first learned about Books Through Bars, and we decided to check it out.

The first Saturday morning that we showed up at Books Through Bars, it took less than 15 minutes for us to “get” it. Here was an upbeat grassroots project that actually was making a difference, that was extraordinarily easy to participate in, and that clearly welcomed as much assistance as anyone wanted to give, both by showing up to help and by donating books. While so many people find

it easy to marginalize and ostracize prisoners, this program was instead managing to provide constructive support to many individuals who were interested in wisely using their time while incarcerated. We love books and here we saw a way to share that love with others.

We were immediately bitten by the “BTB” bug and have been involved ever since.

Even at that first visit, we realized that the program needs a constant stream of book donations on topics like cultural studies, job skills, and GED and college preparation. So we decided to be part of the effort to gather and deliver book donations, in addition to volunteering.

Over the past three years, we have come up with quite a few ideas for how to spread the word about BTB and gather quality book donations:

- We persuaded the Friends Transitions Support Services, a project of the Peace and Social Concerns Committee of the Haddonfield Friends (Quaker) Meeting, to become a book collector for BTB. FTSS spread the word among South Jersey Friends Meetings and now books are donated by attendees throughout South Jersey. The books that are collected are brought to our front porch at home, and we transport them to the BTB library. *(continued on page 7)*

BTB Implements New Tracking and Postage System

For many years, Books Through Bars has wanted to keep more complete records on who has requested books and what books they received. We also wanted a way to eliminate some of the human error that can cause packages to not reach their destination — like incorrectly copying an inmate number on the mailing label, or having a postage stamp fall off a package. Thanks to Steve Beuret, a long-time Books Through Bars supporter, our wishes are now a reality.

Steve developed a computerized system that allows us to track book requests and package costs, as well as generate shipping and postage labels. We will now have more accurate information on which book topics are most requested, the volume of requests filled by state and prison, and how often each individual requests books from us. This information will be invaluable to us going forward.

Many thanks to Steve for donating his time and talent to this important project! If you are in need of custom web-based software, learn about Steve's services at www.sb3d.com.

BTB Can Re-use Your Tyvek Envelopes

Does your office receive lots of mail in tyvek envelopes? Books Through Bars can re-use them to send books to prisoners! Tyvek (the material used to make Priority Mail packaging, for example) is very sturdy, but quite expensive to purchase. So bring us your used envelopes, and we'll remove the address information, turn them inside out, and wrap book packages with them. You can bring us envelopes at the times we're open for volunteers and book donations (Tuesdays 7:30-9:30 pm; 1st and 3rd Saturdays 11 am-2 pm), or contact us to arrange an alternate drop-off time.

Our Accomplishments 2007-08

Books Through Bars just closed its 2007-08 fiscal year. Here's a "snapshot" of our accomplishments of the past 12 months.

- Sent nearly 6,000 book packages to individual prisoners (mostly in PA and other states in the Mid-Atlantic region).
- Sent large book donations to 29 prison libraries across the country
- Provided books to supplement the libraries of three local jail units and halfway houses
- Provided integrated, ongoing service-learning activities to three youth groups
- Hosted 24 one-day service groups
- Continued the development of a project to support prisoners who tutor and mentor others

Service-Learning at Books Through Bars

Interview with Marjorie Scharf of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia

Service-learning is a teaching strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection. Students in Books Through Bars' service-learning program visit our site with their school class or youth group. At each visit, the students select and package books for prisoners and participate in a learning activity that highlights one aspect of prisoner education or the larger criminal justice system. After the service session, students participate in reflection and have opportunities to learn more about the topic.

Marjorie Scharf manages a youth program at the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia called Walking the Walk. Over the course of the 2007-2008 school year, Walking the Walk high school students attended five service-learning sessions at Books Through Bars. In late August, we spoke to Margie to find out her impressions of the project.



BTB: Tell us a little bit about the Interfaith Center's mission and the work you do there.

MS: The overall mission is to advance mutual trust, understanding, and cooperation among faith communities in order to work together for the common good of the region. The vision is to enable people of all faiths to share their deepest convictions, shape solutions to common problems, and live out their highest values and aspirations through celebration, service, education, and action. Walking the Walk lives out that mission for youth. Walking the Walk is a model of how youth from a variety of faith traditions can engage in dialogue, work and learn together, and also creatively reflect upon their experience. We create partnerships between at least one synagogue, one mosque, and one church, and from there we recruit a total of 20 interested high

school students. They come with an adult mentor from their congregation and meet with us for 13 sessions throughout the entire school year. Half of the sessions are retreats to explore shared values, and the other half involve putting the values into action through community service.

BTB: How did the Interfaith Center get involved with Books Through Bars, and why?

MS: We were looking for a community service site that was located in an area that was convenient for our partnering congregations, but most importantly, one in which the organizers were really interested in working together with us to create a mutually beneficial experience. The work of BTB addresses all of the shared values of our interfaith community. Also, BTB was a nice combination of meeting a need and doing something concrete, and seeing the "human face" of the issue through the letters and the guest speakers.

BTB: Describe your typical service-learning session at Books Through Bars.

MS: Each session had a different theme. For example, in one session we explored the effect of incarceration on family members. We had two guest speakers who really shed some light on the theme, Pastor Dicie and Peggy Sims of Reunification Transportation Services. Sister Peggy spoke of the distance between Philadelphia and where many people's family members are incarcerated; there is a lack of transportation to many of those prisons, and her organization helps to meet that need. Pastor Dicie had lost a son due to violence, and had people close to her in and out of prison. She spoke to an amazing ability for patience and forgiveness and faith. (continued on page 4)

Service-Learning *(continued from page 3)*

Then there was time for participants to ask questions. For the service part of the session, BTB had pre-screened letters so that everyone was filling requests for people in PA prisons. We met the book needs in pairs—we encouraged everyone to be with someone they don't know that well, from another congregation. Once they finished their package, they had to identify on a map of PA where the prison was, so you could really see the distance from Philadelphia to the prison. The activity met a variety of learning needs. It was interactive, we got to listen and talk to guest speakers, but we were also up and moving around. At the end, there was time for reflection.

BTB: How do you think the students felt about participating in the service learning sessions? What reactions did you get from them?

MS: They felt like they were meeting a need, but most importantly, across the board everybody felt that they were introduced to issues they never thought about before. They also got to see and feel the humanity of people who are incarcerated. It really changed some preconceived notions. It motivated some to conduct dictionary/book drives at their own schools or congregations, which is continuing at one of the schools this fall.

BTB: What were the most valuable things the students gained from their service learning experience?

MS: Being made aware of the passion which many of those who are incarcerated have for learning and improving themselves, the importance of providing education and other services in prisons, and some of the inequities and injustices of the criminal justice system. And lastly, understanding how their own religious traditions relate to incarceration, helping those in need, forgiveness...that was really, really valuable.

2008 Pack-a-thon

We'd like to acknowledge all the volunteers, donors, and local businesses that supported the 2008 Pack-a-Thon on May 18th. Twenty-seven volunteers participated, helping send 250 book packages and raise over \$2000 during the day-long event. Special thanks go out to Abbraccio Restaurant and Whole Foods (South Street) for their delicious food donations.



Criminal Justice Issues

The School to Prison Pipeline by Tricia Way

You may already be aware that U.S. taxpayers fund our nation's incarceration system, which currently holds more than two million people at a cost of over \$60 billion each year. You might also know that, since 1980, the number of incarcerated people in the US has quadrupled. What you may not realize is that overly punitive policies in many public schools are contributing to these figures. Suspensions and expulsions which remove children from their learning environments, along with the increasing integration of police into school disciplinary procedures, can cut a path that disproportionately leads low-income, minority, and disabled students into criminal justice systems. This commonly referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline is rooted in the zero tolerance campaigns of Reagan's war on drugs, where law enforcement agencies responded swiftly and harshly to drug offenders on or near school property. After congress passed the 1994 Gun Free School Act, zero tolerance campaigns were implemented by many states to expel students for possession of firearms and were often broad-

ened to include any drug or weapon possession. Within the last decade zero tolerance policies have been expanded to include non-violent behavior and typical adolescent misconduct. Acts such as disruptively tapping a pencil on one's desk, cursing, or throwing food have become criminalized in some schools.

Out-of-school suspensions provide students with less supervision and more time and opportunities for getting into trouble outside of school. Moreover, their absence disrupts their education, leaving students returning from a suspension further behind their classmates. This can lead to more cause for misbehaving when they do return to school, and, in turn, increase the likelihood of expulsion or arrest for repeat offenses. According to a report compiled by the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc., there were three million suspensions and 97,000 expulsions throughout the U.S. in 2000, an 82% increase since 1974. What is more shocking, however, is that even pre-schoolers are increasingly among those suspended. The same report cites two studies: one that highlights the staggering rate of suspensions from publicly-funded preschools, and another that indicates the correlation between suspensions and an increased likelihood of repeating a grade, dropping out of school, committing a crime, and/or ending up behind bars as an adult.¹

LETTERS TO BTB

I just wanted to let you know that the books arrived and how much I appreciate them. There are about two dozen guys on my unit sharing a single bookcase of less than great books. It has been a very long time since any books have been purchased by the prison. If there's a book in the library here less than a decade or two old, it's because an inmate donated it.

T.R., a prisoner in New Jersey

The increasing numbers of arrests and citations within schools land "offenders" in the juvenile court system and, in many cases, provide a direct route into the criminal justice system. In many schools, increased numbers of police patrol the hallways of school buildings and police officers have been given greater charge of overall disciplinary procedures; in some cases, school districts have formed their own police forces. Some public schools have even come to resemble prisons, having installed surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and/or canine units that invest schools even deeper into their no tolerance policies.

(continued on page 6)

1. NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc.
www.naacpldf.org/content/pdf/pipeline/Dismantling_the_School_to_Prison_Pipeline.pdf, retrieved on 09/12/2008

The School to Prison Pipeline *(continued from page 5)*

Furthermore, there are race, class, gender, and ability dimensions to the school-to-prison pipeline that are deeply troubling. A disproportionate number of boys of color, low-income students, and students with learning disabilities are the recipients of the suspensions, expulsions, and citations that characterize zero tolerance programs.

Join us for the Affordable Art Auction

On Sunday November 2nd at 7pm, we will be holding a benefit "affordable art auction" at the A-Space/Books Through Bars office. Local artists will be donating their work, and a few pieces from the Contexts Collection by Artists in Prison will be available for bidding as well. The auction will be "live" rather than silent, so it should be fun - we hope to see you there! If you have art you'd like to donate, please contact us at info@booksthroughbars.org or 215-727-8170.

It is important to note that suspensions, expulsions, and other "criminalizing" policies are not the only way to handle discipline in schools. Some schools are developing innovative programs to keep students engaged in learning and prevent discipline issues, rather than harshly reacting to them. For example, increased support can be provided to students with mental-health problems and learning disabilities, and constructive in-school alternatives to out-of-school suspension can be implemented.

It is clear that overly punitive policies are pushing students out of school, rather than providing the support and guidance they need to complete their education. Given this reality, it is no wonder that so many prisoners request GED preparation manuals and other educational materials in their letters to Books Through Bars. If more supportive services designed to keep "troubled" students engaged in school were in place, there would undoubtedly be fewer requests like this. While the work Books Through Bars does is vital and necessary, it is also important to address the school-to-prison pipeline more directly, so as to keep children from unnecessarily entering the criminal justice system. Solutions, alternatives, and movements are available and underway. You can find more information about the school-to-prison pipeline and/or get involved in reform at the websites below.

Advancement Project* www.advancementproject.org/ourwork/opportunity-to-learn/schoolhouse-to-jailhouse/index.php (Executive summary of their 2005 report, "Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track," available at www.mindfully.org/Reform/2005/Schoolhouse-Jailhouse-Track24mar05.htm)

Education not Incarceration <http://ednotinc.org/>
(for more information on the Delaware Valley chapter of ENI, contact lindsay.liprando@gmail.com)

NAACP Legal and Education Fund, Inc.*
www.naacpldf.org/content/pdf/pipeline/Dismantling_the_School_to_Prison_Pipeline.pdf

"Opportunities Suspended," report from the National Summit on Zero Tolerance
http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/17/21/dd.pdf

* denotes that material listed served as a primary source for this article

We will continue to provide information about relevant criminal justice issues in each newsletter. Do you have an idea for a topic we should cover in the next issue? Let us know at info@booksthroughbars.org

Our Family's Story *(continued from page 1)*

- Nora, a high-school student, persuaded her Interact Club to adopt BTB as one of its activities. A decorated book collection box sits outside the principal's office at her high school; these, too find their way to our front porch and eventually to West Philadelphia. Members from her Interact group have made a number of excursions to the program on Saturdays to respond to inmate letters. Because Interact is aligned with the Rotary Club in our town, Rotary has now become involved in donating dictionaries, which are the books most frequently requested by inmates.

LETTERS TO BTB

Greetings! Today I received the books you sent me. I would like to say thank you very much for your kindness and generosity...I am in the SHU, and I'm locked down 23 hours a day. So getting the books you sent me really warmed my heart and brightened my day.

M.M., a prisoner in Pennsylvania

- Justin and Leah educated members of our reading club about BTB and we now regularly receive book donations from them and their friends... and their friends' friends...
- At our annual winter holiday open house this year, we asked our guests to bring book donations. Did they ever! The front porch was really full in December! We'll be repeating that each year.
- Leah has announced at her place of work that she is accepting donations of books for BTB, and they are now rolling in there as well.
- Nora is about to launch a town-wide book drive to collect even more books. We figure at this rate we may not see the floor of our front porch for quite some time...

One of these days, if you show up at Books Through Bars, you may run into one or more of us. In the meantime, if you have any books to donate, there might still be a little space on our front porch... Better yet, start collecting books on your front porch!

Have Leah and Nora inspired you to collect books for BTB? Get started by reviewing the list of books that we need (and don't need!) on the last page of the newsletter, or download a printable flyer at www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/donate-books

Books Through Bars "Goes Green" with the Pedal Co-op

A big "thank you" goes out to the Pedal Co-op for generously donating their services to Books Through Bars. The Pedal Co-op is a worker-run organization that uses bike trailers to make deliveries and provide recycling services for local businesses. Books Through Bars now uses the Pedal Co-op (instead of volunteers' cars) to transport our book packages to the local post office. The Pedal Co-op can help your business "go green" too! Find out more at www.pedalcoop.org



Donate Books — Get Involved



Books Through Bars is dependent upon your donations of quality reading material. We ALWAYS need the following kinds of books:

- Dictionaries (English, Spanish-English, law)
- Black history and fiction
- Puerto Rican history
- Mexican History
- GED study guides
- High-school level textbooks and workbooks in paperback
- Introductory College textbooks in paperback
- Yoga, meditation, and exercise
- Vocational skills
- Money management, personal finance, small business

For all categories, paperback books are greatly preferred (many prisons don't accept hardback). We do not need: fiction that is hardback, romance novels, out-of-date texts or reference books, any books that are very old or in poor condition.

Visit our website for days and times to donate books:

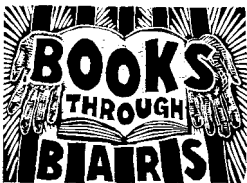
www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/donate-books or call 215-727-8170

Volunteer with Books Through Bars!

You can select and package books for prisoners, organize a fundraiser, help with office work, or share your special skills with us.

Visit our website to find out how to get involved:

www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/volunteer or call 215-727-8170



Books Through Bars
4722 Baltimore Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19143

www.booksthroughbars.org
(215) 727-8170