

# b t b

## books through bars

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### **Research Project Documents Limited Educational Access in Nation's Prisons** by Emily Abendroth

If you've volunteered with Books Through Bars, you know that many book request letters include poignant accounts of prisoners' obstacles to furthering their education. In an effort to document and better understand the situation, we are compiling these first-hand reports of the various, numerous, and seemingly growing barriers to education for people in prison.

In every book package we send, we include a brief survey that the recipient is asked to complete. By collecting responses to the survey, along with unsolicited information included in book request letters, we gathered information on 157 prisons over a six-month period; we noted if educational programs or libraries exist, and the degree to which these resources are regularly available, adequately serviced, and widely accessible. We knew that prisoners across the nation have witnessed a dramatic decline in the number, variety, and quality of educational opportunities afforded to them; however, our comprehensive review of six months of letters has revealed a situation even starker than years of experience prepared us to expect. Inside, we describe our findings regarding educational programs, libraries, and the especially dire situation of inmates in administrative segregation/lockdown. (continued on page 5)

I'm in administrative segregation and we have not a single educational program here. If one cannot afford to buy a correspondence college or GED course (which only less than one percent of ad seg inmates can) you (we) are flat out of luck. So me myself I try to read as much as I can. Oh, and since I'm on the subject any educational books you can send are really appreciated. Math, history, science, business etc.... That would be great!! Well,

## Barbara Hirshkowitz—Leader, Friend, Inspiration



**B**arbara Hirshkowitz, a leader of Books Through Bars for over a decade, passed away on March 2, 2007, after nearly a year of living with pancreatic cancer. Among her many contributions, Barbara was the curator of the Contexts Collection of art by prisoners and a top fundraiser. Her kindness, humor, and untiring efforts in support of the incarcerated are irreplaceable.

Barbara was instrumental in the expansion of Books Through Bars' programs and services, such as the Contexts Collection of Artists in Prison. The Contexts initiative uses prisoner art to reveal the realities of prison life. Through exhibits across the Greater Philadelphia region and in several other states, the Contexts Collection raised public awareness of personal and political aspects of imprisonment, including poverty, racism, violence, family separation, and isolation.

In addition, the Contexts Collection often caught the attention of the media, informing thousands of people about the work of Books Through Bars.

Barbara also organized the Read-a-Thon, an annual fundraiser she designed to harness the energy of her reading group in support of prisoner education. The small group of book lovers would plan a three-day weekend dedicated to reading, soliciting pledges from co-workers, friends and family for each page they read. This year, in spite of her illness, she organized the most successful Read-a-Thon on record, raising an estimated \$25,000 for Books Through Bars. The *Philadelphia Weekly* published an article about the incredible success of the Read-a-Thon, which can be read at [www.philadelphiaweekly.com/view.php?id=14195](http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/view.php?id=14195)

Books Through Bars will honor Barbara's life-long commitment to social justice with a tree-planting in front of our office.



### Tree Planting in honor of Barbara Hirshkowitz

Sunday, November 11, Noon

4722 Baltimore Ave, Philadelphia  
(in front of Books Through Bars office)

*After the planting, join us in the  
A-Space/Books Through Bars office to view  
a selection of pieces from the Contexts  
Collection of Artists in Prison.*

## **VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: Marissa Johnson-Valenzuela**

### ***How long have you been volunteering with BTB?***

Maybe five years, I've lived in West Philadelphia for six so that sounds about right.

### ***What first drew you to get involved?***

I love books, I think everyone should read more. I hate prisons and I think society should address its problems in more effective ways, with more compassion and actual justice. It seems a simple thing, access to books, to knowledge, here in the U.S. but really it isn't simple at all.

### ***What has kept you involved for so long?***

One of the great things about Books Through Bars is that most volunteers can come and go as they need to, without having to worry about the organization falling apart. The core group of volunteers for BTB is what keeps me going — they make it easy for people like me to volunteer when I can, when I need to. We all work so hard and face so much in our daily lives, for me it is really comforting to go to BTB and read letters and package the best books I can find and have a tangible result — a stack of packages that will reach others. It is hard for me to find that physicality in other things I work on in my life.

### ***Tell us about the teens you often bring to volunteer with you.***

I work with teens on probation who are still living at home with their parents. I go to the homes, get to know everyone in the family, and serve as an advocate and link to community resources. For the youth I work with, I'm like a life-skills coach on how to stay out of the juvenile system and be who they want to be. It means being fair, listening to the teens and trying to improve their sense of self-worth. Lack of good education and poverty are basic issues for pretty much every teen that I work with.

We come to Books Through Bars as a way to complete community service hours and/or to have a productive educational activity. I believe that volunteering at Books Through Bars is a great opportunity for "my kids" to learn about injustice and the value of knowledge. We talk about how many letters there are and they are curious about what books prisoners are requesting. They learn about how many prisons there are in so many states and it's hard for most of them to wrap their head around (It's hard for ME to wrap my head around and it should be for all of us). Going to BTB puts them around books in a new way and adds value to knowledge. Overall, they enjoy it and many ask me to go back. The experiences vary but it is always new and positive.

*Marissa recently left Philadelphia to attend graduate school. Thank you, Marissa, and best of luck!*

## **Support BTB at the Dash for Democracy!**

BTB supporters are forming a team for the Dash for Democracy 5K run/walk on November 3, 2007. The team with the most participants will win \$2000 for their organization, so join us! Email [info@booksthroughbars.org](mailto:info@booksthroughbars.org) to get instructions for registering.

# Our New Website is a Great Resource!

**B**ooks Through Bars recently launched a newly-designed website at [www.booksthroughbars.org](http://www.booksthroughbars.org). The website provides useful resources for current supporters as well as information for people who are new to our program. Visit the new site to:



- Download flyers and brochures that will assist you in organizing a book drive or recruiting
- Order a Books Through Bars tote bag, greeting card, or *Insiders' Art* book;
- View an interactive map of prison book programs across the US, designed to assist site visitors from other locations in getting involved in their area;
- Sign up for our monthly email updates (if you're not on the email list, it's worth a visit to the site just for this!).

Many thanks to Casey Liscum, a local software engineer and Books Through Bars supporter, who dedicated many hours of volunteer labor to re-designing the site.

## The Annual BTB Pack-a-thon

*We'd like to acknowledge all the volunteers, donors, and local businesses that supported the 2007 Pack-a-Thon on May 12. Special thanks go out to Abbraccio Restaurant, the White Dog Café, Vientianne Café, and Incredibly Edible Delites for their donations of delicious food and prizes.*



## Research Project *(continued from page 1)*

It is widely reported that the majority of US prisoners have not graduated from high school. All state prison systems are federally required to offer GED classes, ostensibly to help remedy this problem. Examining the wide variety of frustrations prisoners faced in their attempts to participate in these classes, which should in theory be the most accessible, provides us with a useful window into the broader roadblocks that frequently curtail prisoners' efforts to pursue learning while incarcerated.

One roadblock to participating in programs such as GED classes is the complicated array of eligibility requirements that some prisons enact. For instance, many prisoners are unable to participate in educational programming until they are within a few years of their release. At the same time, some states restrict their GED programming to prisoners under the age of 21. For many, this means that once they are within a few years of their release, they are older than 21 and therefore not eligible for enrollment in such a program. An inmate in Trenton, New Jersey writes: "The only degree program here at the prison that is offered is a state-certified GED program. The only prisoners who are guaranteed admittance into the GED program are those who are under 18 years old. As far as I know, there are not any 18 year old prisoners [here]."

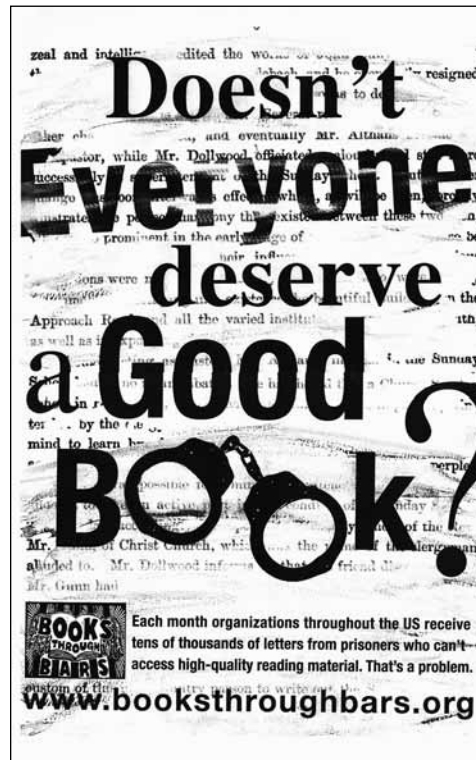
Furthermore, some prisons do not offer even a GED program. As one prisoner in Wewahitchka, FL writes, "Here at Gulf Correctional Institution we are not offered the GED program. There is only one GED manual in the library reference section that has to be shared by 1,200 inmates." Survey after survey comments upon the fact that there are either no programs in their facility or that they have witnessed a significant decrease in programming (in terms of number, frequency, variety, duration, and quality) during the time of their incarceration. Many report that despite their eligibility on paper, they are unable to participate in any kind of programming due to conflicts with their work schedules; others cite long waiting lists (sometimes up to 3 years or more). A substantial number of respondents complain that course materials are not provided at all or that they are not permitted to take the materials back to their cells to study, making it difficult for them to keep up with the coursework. Still others testify that the range of courses offered at their institution is too limited and that the majority of classes available are too basic to meet diverse prisoners' needs.

As funds allocated to prisoner education have shrunk, library facilities have suffered too. While new correctional facilities (and 50% of existing prisons have been built in the last 20 years) often do not even attempt to create libraries, budget cuts force existing facilities to eliminate their library staff positions and to keep circulating, without additions, limited numbers of outdated, irrelevant books often missing some of their pages. Many of the same frustrations and complaints about educational programming are seen again here: either prisoners do not have a library in their unit or they are not able to access the library that is there due to scheduling conflicts, limited hours, restricted visitation permits, and few staff. As an individual confined in Imperial, California writes, "As to having a prison library there is one — plus there is a schedule open to the view of everyone. But when the doors will actually be opened that is anyone's guess. Access to the library is an actual mission impossible. There will be times in which we'll be slammed down for months at a time."

For those who actually do manage to access the library, that experience can provoke its own disappointments in terms of the range and quality of the materials available. Non-fiction,

*(continued on page 6)*

## Poster Raises Awareness of Prisoner Access to Books



As lovers of books, library patrons are natural allies for prison book programs; however, many don't know about the existence of groups like Books Through Bars, or that access to books is difficult or impossible for many prisoners. For this reason, Books Through Bars has developed an awareness-raising poster to be distributed to and displayed at libraries across the country.

Design for Social Impact, a Philadelphia-based firm specializing in public interest campaigns, worked with Books Through Bars to create an image and message with maximum impact. The poster will be distributed to libraries throughout the Greater Philadelphia area as well as by prison book programs in other cities throughout the US.

If you would like to display a poster in your local library, contact us at [info@booksthroughbars.org](mailto:info@booksthroughbars.org) or 215-727-8170.

## Research Project *(continued from page 5)*

legal, and educational texts are frequently scarce, and pertinent cultural studies materials all the more so. Consider this comment from a prisoner in Huntingdon, PA: "98% of the population [in SCI Huntingdon] is made up of African American and Latino brothers, yet if you walk into the library before you see the population, you would think that 98% of the population was white. Out of 100% of the books in the library, I would say 3% are of African American and/or Latino authors or subject matter. And this is being kind with the 3%." Whether or not the numbers reported in this instance are exact seems hardly the issue of greatest consequence. This is a situation that, in one fashion or another, we see remarked on repeatedly in prisoner commentaries.

It is important to note that the situations discussed above refer almost exclusively to conditions encountered in general population units. The number of inmates in segregated housing units has risen dramatically, to the point of constituting, in some of the largest max and super-max facilities, half or more of those being held within. For the inmate, this effectively means a state of near permanent lock-down, a scenario in which over-crowded and under-served programs and libraries become even scarcer. Prisoners confined in administrative

## Research Project *(continued from page 6)*

segregation are not allowed to attend educational programming nor are they permitted to visit the library. Some facilities do make available to these prisoners a roving book cart — typically containing one or two small shelves of miscellaneous books and arriving at their units sporadically — while others do not allow prisoners housed in the segregated units any access to books at all.

To close, we contrast two prisons that have very different ways of approaching educational programming. For years, inmates at the state prison in Susanville, CA have commented on their lack of access to both resources and programs. Sent in the Spring of 2005, a letter coming from that facility pleaded, “Can you please take into consideration that we have been on lockdown for 19 months with no library access at all and there’s nothing that indicates we’ll be coming off anytime soon.” According to the calculations of another prisoner housed there, there had been roughly 140 lock-downs in the two and a half year period preceding his correspondence. Yet another observed, “In 2005, the prison offered for the first time some local community college classes for 50 students out of 5,000. All vocational classes closed several years ago. There is an average of 6 to 9 months per year of lockdown.” Even in non-lockdown conditions, prisoners at this facility get to go to the library only within 2 to 8 weeks after submitting a written request to do so. The general library collection is comprised mostly of fiction and westerns, while law library access is limited strictly to persons with verifiable active litigation underway.

In contrast, a prisoner at the women’s facility in Windham, Maine writes:

The Women’s Center offers a ton of great programs. Everyone who is in the building is eligible but there is a long waiting list — sometimes 3 to 4 months. But there is a whole slew of stuff one can do with the time like: knitting, yoga, exercising, bible studies, and working on yourself. The prison provides paper, pencil and books if needed. For classes for college credit, there are some scholarships that are donated by Maine Universities [...] We have a great library and we can inter-library loan anything we don’t have. It has regular hours, everyone who is in the building can go, and we can check out as many books as we want. The selection is good and always growing. [During the course of her letter, the writer also mentions the availability of career counseling, a kitchen baking program, a dog handling/training program, a vegetable garden, production of an in-house newsletter, and dancing classes, amongst other things.]

Unfortunately, although the excerpt above attests to its possibility, we see very, very few letters of this kind. All too often, reading and learning are seen as privileges that can be taken away from prisoners — and they are taken away, it seems, with equal or greater frequency than they are given. These findings demonstrate how important the work of programs like Books Through Bars continues to be.

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## 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)
- Mexican History
- GED study books
- Vocational skills
- Black history and fiction
- Puerto Rican history
- High school textbooks
- Yoga and meditation

Visit our website for days and times to donate books:

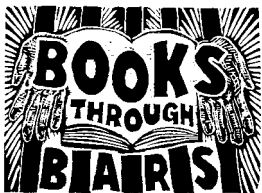
[www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/donate-books](http://www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/donate-books)

### Volunteer with Books Through Bars!

You can select and package books for prisoners, drive book packages to the post office, 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](http://www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/volunteer)



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