



# URBANA-CHAMPAIGN BOOKS TO PRISONERS

A working group of the Urbana Champaign Independent Media Center



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## Reading with Feeling Thank You for the Hope You Give

Rachel Rasmussen, Program Coordinator

The mission of UC Books to Prisoners (B2P) is to provide books free of charge to people incarcerated in Illinois and to educate ourselves and our community about incarceration and prisons. Why? We do it because many of the books that incarcerated people want to read are not accessible to them. Literacy improves the more you read, and we all tend to read more when we can read what we want to read. So, prisoners write to us requesting books they want to read. And among the thousands of books donated to us every year, we will look hard to find those books or a close-enough substitute. Some of us will choose to just go buy them.

Reading the letters is educational. Most people are surprised to learn that the most frequently requested book by prisoners is a dictionary. It's why we intentionally welcome volunteers from all walks of life. The more people see how valid these book requests are for a positive, constructive use of time, the more restricting access to books is questioned. It seems to work against a successful re-entry into society. Society pays a great deal to incarcerate all the people it does. All expenses considered, books are cheap, and education has been proven to reduce recidivism.

Last winter B2P received an extremely generous donation from a freshly graduated student volunteer. It will significantly increase our mission capacity. The donor, who asked to be anonymous has given permission for us to share an excerpt of her letter (page 3).



Carol Emmerling with a list of potential projects under consideration for funding with the volunteer's donation.

The letter gives passionate voice to the impact that reading many, many prisoners' requests for books has on volunteers. With no less passion a prisoner's letter (page3) tells how our work restores their capacity to feel human. Very frequently prisoners find it a miracle that there is this organization that is set up to do nothing but locate the books they want/need to read and that sends them for free. Just for the asking.

Thank you to everyone who is part of this miracle. B2P is deeply grateful for every donation, large or small, whether in time, talent, books, money or encouragement. May it beget more miracles. ✂

## Extending our Services to Youth in Detention Center

Carol Emmerling, B2P Volunteer

Working with Champaign County CASA as a volunteer advocate for children in the foster care system, I sometimes need to visit youth being held at the County's Juvenile Detention Center (JDC). The JDC is a secure facility for minors between the ages of 13 and 17 being held on serious criminal

## 85% of juveniles in detention centers have issues with reading

charges. On one visit with an exceptionally bright and articulate young man, I asked what he enjoyed doing. He told me he liked to read but complained that the JDC's collection was very small. His comment led me to contact University of Illinois School of

Information Science graduate students who had previously staffed a library at the JDC. One told me, "Books go fast there...they get read to shreds."

Many of the most popular books at the JDC were award-winning books that spoke to the difficult life experiences of some children in foster care: homelessness, violence, drugs, sexual violence, arrest, and detention. Books on psychology, self-help, and careers were also well-liked. A conversation with JDC Superintendent Keith Willis, revealed that due to funding issues and COVID, there are very few books in the collection. Willis responded positively to my idea of purchasing books for the JDC.

As a retired academic I know how important it is to foster reading in the young as both a skill and a

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**(Book Club, continued from page 3)** Ultimately, these programs would not be possible without help from supportive organizations like B2P in Urbana. Hill C.C. does have a general library but we do not have duplicate copies of books to effectively maintain a book club. We are only able to offer our book club because of frequent donations from wonderful organizations. Because of such generosity, we can further our mission in providing a beneficial program for our Individuals in Custody. ✂

**(Extending Services, continued from page 1)** pleasure. Sadly, 85% of juveniles in detention centers have issues with reading, according to the Literacy Project Foundation. Since the 1990s, researchers have consistently linked reading problems to involvement in the juvenile justice system and identified literacy as a key ingredient for incarcerated children's future success. Providing books has been shown to help break the "school-to-prison pipeline."

The donation reported above in this newsletter creates an opportunity to extend B2P's present County Jail services to the JDC. With the support of the JDC Superintendent, I proposed purchasing books for the JDC on a trial basis, with the goal of making this part of B2P's ongoing services. The proposal was favorably received, and I look forward to providing an update on this project in the next B2P Newsletter. ✂

## County Jail Library Program Update

Anna Hough, B2P Jail Librarian

As most of you know, B2P has a Jail Library Program which consisted of small lending libraries at Champaign County's Downtown and Satellite jails. The County close the Downtown Jail this month. However, our lending library continues at the Satellite jail. Currently B2P volunteers are performing biweekly "clean-up" sessions there in preparation for reopening after a long COVID-related hiatus.

The Sheriff's Office graciously provided new permanent shelving for high-demand books at the Satellite, increasing access to reading materials for our patrons. You can support the jail library by donating paperback books in good condition in these popular genres: Reference, Science, History, GED study materials, Skills and Trades, Mystery-Thriller, Science fiction, Fantasy and Urban fiction in the donation bins in the front lobby of the IMC. ✂

## Books to Prisoners thanks the following organizations for their support:

*Altrusa, Champaign Rotary Club, Sunrise Rotary Charitable Foundation, Common Ground Food Coop, Dixon Graphics, Fair Isle Books & Gifts, Minuteman Press, the MTD, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Urbana and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Hinsdale.*



# Unitarian Universalists and an Independent Bookstore Help B2P Get Prisoners the Books They Want Most

Cathy Blanford, Hinsdale, IL



Veteran B2P volunteers threw a luncheon for Hinsdale guests in March. L to R: Priscilla Christians, Ann Lowry, Liz Abraham, Julia Beckman and Cathy Blanford of Hinsdale, Susan Hill, Jenny Lokshin, and James Winston.

It was while I was visiting my partner’s daughter in West Virginia that I was first introduced to the idea of programs that send books to people who are incarcerated. Katy Ryan started the Appalachian Prison Book Project many years ago, which serves prisoners in six states. During our visit, we spent a morning volunteering for this project and were extremely moved by the letters that we read both requesting books and expressing gratitude for books already received. I was inspired and told Katy I wanted to start a similar program in Illinois.

Thankfully, she was able to direct me to a listing of such projects throughout the country and there I discovered Urbana-Champaign Books to Prisoners. I was relieved to see I didn’t need to reinvent the wheel. Here was a well-established program that served prisoners in Illinois state institutions as well as the local jails. Back home I reached out to the prison pen pals of the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale, where I am a member, to see if they would be willing to support this worthwhile project and we were off!

It just so happened that a member of our church, Debbi Daniel-Wayman, owns an independent bookstore. She was immediately taken by the idea of supporting UC Books to Prisoners and volunteered to set up a web page Wish List, wherein anyone can purchase books to donate, and they will be sent directly to UC Books to Prisoners for distribution. In addition, she

pledged to donate 50% of the profits to UC Books to Prisoners!

To kick off this collaboration, we held a book fair after a church service in February. During the service, I read a letter from my pen pal William who is incarcerated at Sheridan [Not the prisoner letter on the next page]. In it, he told of his sorrow at the transfer of his best friend to another institution and how hard prison life can be on

**Watch, these books will be off our shelves by the end of the week!**

the “ties that bind.” The response after the service was amazing. Every book listed was purchased! Soon my friend Julia and I were headed to Urbana to deliver some of the newly purchased books.

When Rachel Rasmussen, B2P’s Program Coordinator, met us at the door I felt immediately that here was a dedicated kindred soul. She and the volunteers were so excited as they opened the boxes of books. “These are excellent!” they said, “We *never* have enough of these and *everyone* wants one! Watch, these books will be off our shelves by the end of the week!”

While we were there, my pen pal just happened to call me. When he heard where I was, he was eager to share his gratitude for

the many books he has received from B2P through the years. Some of the volunteers teared up, telling me later that it was both surreal and poignant to stand in the space where they only knew prisoners as letters, and then hear directly a “letter writer’s” voice from prison in real time talking about books he’d received from their efforts. It was clear to us UUs that this organization is doing a world of good and that we could be valuable partners with them.

Next church year we will be taking up a collection to support this program and of course we will continue to encourage everyone to purchase from the list of the most requested books from Debbi’s book shop. What are these books that are so often requested and so seldom donated? You’ll have to go to the online list to find out! . ☘



L to R: Julia Beckman from UU church of Hinsdale; Jenny Lokshin, B2P volunteer and member of the Urbana UU church; Cathy Blanford, a member of the UU Church of Hinsdale, a criminal justice advocate and director of the UU Pen Pal Program at her church.

**When you purchase books from**  
**[www. bookshop.org/shop/uchbookstoprisoners](http://www.bookshop.org/shop/uchbookstoprisoners)**  
**you can be sure**

- ✓ they are highly requested by prisoners *and*
- ✓ 50% of profits will be donated to UC-B2P *and*
- ✓ you’ll be supporting an independent bookstore.



## DEAR BOOKS TO PRISONERS . . . Excerpt from the Donor/Volunteer’s Letter

'When you've been in prison since the age of 16 years old, these surroundings can jade you leaving you helpless, hopeless, alone, and questioning your value to this world. Yet, the work you and the other volunteers do enriches ones soul. Seeing beyond my blue prison clothing I wear everyday, beyond the social constructs of prisoners where we mainly socialize by race or gangs, beyond the psychologically mood altering colors which the inside of prisons are painted - dull greys, matte deep reds, and lifeless yellows, - keeping us in mood altering states... basically emotionally dulled.

Your work is so much more than just collecting donations of books or money... your work is enriching the souls of men, women, and children. You remind us that we are human beings who haven't felt like people - humans - for years or decades even.

## Excerpt from the Donor/Volunteer’s Letter

Dear Books to Prisoners,

Please accept our donation of \$13,500. . . .

I don’t find it an exaggeration to say that my life revolves around reading. I was raised in libraries and have always found comfort and joy within books and the literary communities at large. It is nearly unimaginable to me that members of our society do not have free access to books and written materials and even more unfathomable is the fact that there are those in positions of authority who intentionally withhold such resources from specific groups and individuals.

I learned about B2P during my first few weeks . . . at the University of Illinois. I have been volunteering with Books to Prisoners for some time now and have witnessed first-hand the impact this organization has on the lives of incarcerated individuals. The prison-industrial complex exemplifies informational gatekeeping at its worst and any efforts to push through, and ultimately remove such barriers is as noble a cause as any in my book.

Goodbye  
Hello



Over half of our regular volunteers are college and graduate students. That means that each spring we say goodbye to many who have worked for us for many years. It is bittersweet, however. While pictures above show what is the last day for some, it is the first day for others in the same picture. Thank you for everything you gave for incarcerated people: Genna Ellingson, Ben Candee, J.D. Duffy, Sam Lindgren, Nathan Sonnenshein, Matt Wattelet, Katherine Lanadon and Tori Gellman and Hannah Ellinason, who are cleaning stickers off used books.



### UC BOOKS TO PRISONERS BY THE NUMBERS

January to June 2022



**Volunteer  
hours**  
1700+



**Books sent**  
3,161



**Shipping  
cost**  
\$2710



**Dictionaries sent**  
256



**900+ Incarcerated  
People Served**

**MARK YOUR CALENDAR: OUR FALL BOOK  
BENEFIT SALE IS SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8<sup>TH</sup>**

## Book Club Provides a Sense of Empowerment at Hill Correctional Center

Meg Ryan, Leisure Specialist

Hill Correctional Center’s Leisure Time Services (LTS) Department initiated a book club for its Individuals in Custody in November 2021. The program was offered to all individuals but limited to only 10 members due to COVID-19 restrictions. Once those restrictions are lifted, we anticipate a large growth in our membership.

Our members meet twice a month and are led by two fellow peers. These meetings enable our members to discuss literature from a wide array of genres. This allows for a deeper understanding of the provided reading materials and encourages members to converse about different perceptions of what they read and understand. Members are encouraged to suggest different books and/or genres that they are interested in reading. Programs such as the LTS Book Club, provide a sense of empowerment to our Individuals in Custody. Our book club allows for Individuals to not only have additional access to books, but also provides the opportunity to have constructive conversation with their fellow peers. I intentionally selected a diverse group of Individuals to ensure there would be varied perspectives and opinions about the reading material. Having personally sat in on the meetings, I have observed all our members participating in discussion and even exuding confidence when doing so. Book club meetings are efficient but also light-hearted and I can tell the members genuinely enjoy the time together.

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