



Finding a second chance in a book

Bridges Library System donates reading materials to jails, centers

Each July and December, hundreds of new textbooks, novels, movies, and more are sorted and packed into cardboard boxes. No, this isn't Santa's workshop. The books and materials are donations from the Bridges Library System for use at the Waukesha County Jail. While stacks of Harry Potter books, dictionaries, and nature documentaries might seem pretty ordinary, these materials change lives through an adult education partnership between the library system, the jail, and the Waukesha County Technical College. According to the Department of Justice, "The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure." Through WCTC's literacy education programs at the jail, inmates have the opportunity to attend classes where they build "vocabulary, knowledge, and a greater appreciation for the world of books," said Susan Taylor, Adult Basic Education instructor with WCTC. She continued, "Increasing literacy has the potential to increase employment, aspirations, physical and mental health, and thereby aid in the crime prevention strategy." It also reduces recidivism, which is the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend. A 2009 study from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice found that "correctional education improves the chances that inmates who are released from prison will not return."

WCTC has offered classes for

the classroom and in the jail's housing units. Both WCTC instructors and inmates put in requests for specific materials, including the "Lord of the Rings" series, thesauri, spiritual self-help books, presidential biographies, and popular novels by James Patterson and others. Graphic novels, teen coloring books, and popular young adult novels are also purchased and distributed at the Waukesha County Juvenile Center and Lad Lake, a juvenile care center. These donations aid the work of WCTC instructors by expanding inmates' access to reading materials. They also fulfill the mission of libraries to provide everyone with information and access to ideas. Bridges Library System's Inclusive Services librarian Angela Meyers works with Taylor each year to make this happen. "As a librarian," Meyers said, "I want the inmates to know that there is a whole world of books outside the walls of a jail."

Besides the adult education materials offered, the Bridges Library System also provides children's books for the parenting program at the jail. To keep incarcerated parents and their children connected, program participants read a children's book aloud while being recorded. The DVD and book are then sent to their children. So far, 14 women and 16 men have participated.

The partnership continues to flourish due to the popularity of the books and materials donated. "There are daily requests by students in the WCTC classroom for books that interest them," Taylor said.

"Because of the Bridges program, a whole new world has opened for many students," Taylor said. "Students long to fill the time served with productive activities such as reading. For many, reading may have been the furthest thing from their mind in the past." Sometimes a second chance, and hope of a better life, is right there in the pages of a book.

(Jill Fuller is the coordinator of Marketing & Communications for Bridges Library System.)



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Submitted photo



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