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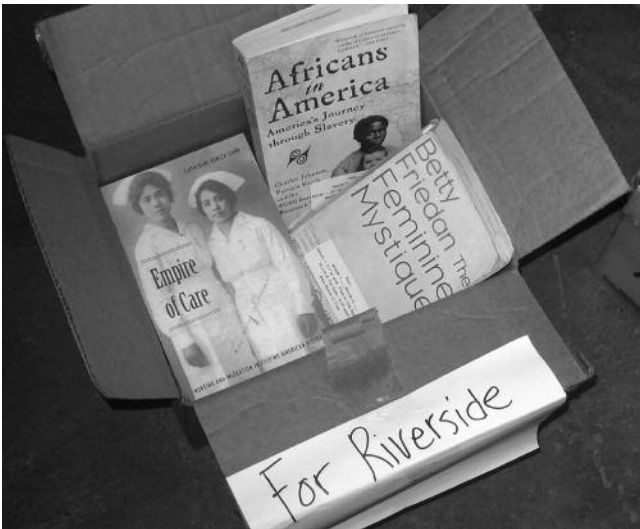
books through bars

fall 2009

vol. 10

The Library Project

Books Through Bars provides literature and library services to the women at Riverside Correctional Facility



In January of this year, five Books Through Bars volunteers stood outside the august, castle-like training facility of the Philadelphia Prison System (PPS) and prepared to take the next step in what had already been a protracted process of getting the bureaucratic pieces in place to begin providing advanced library services to prisoners within the PPS.

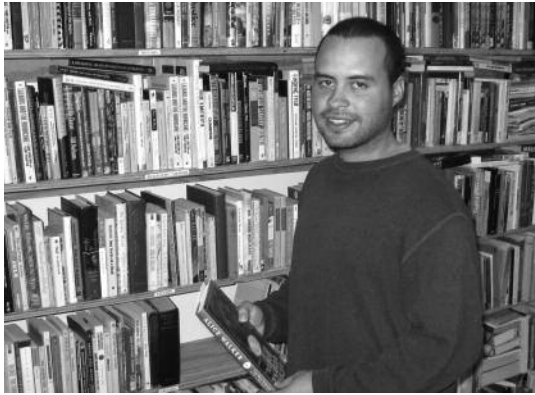
This process had begun in 2006 when, as a Drexel graduate student, one of our members had conducted research about the history of library services to prisoners within the PPS. Her research coupled with the weekly deluge of letters received by Books Through Bars indicated a need for a new project that would provide a more intimate and professional approach to meeting the information needs of prisoners.

After a series of meetings with several wardens and other prison administrators, the Riverside Correctional Facility (RCF), the PPS's all-women facility, was designated as the pilot location for the Library Project. After completing the two days of mandatory training, where we learned hostage survival tips ("Don't be hostile. Don't be obnoxious") and dress code dos and don'ts (see-through or revealing clothing is a don't), and after a month long wait for security clearance, we earned our ID cards and were ready to enter the prison.

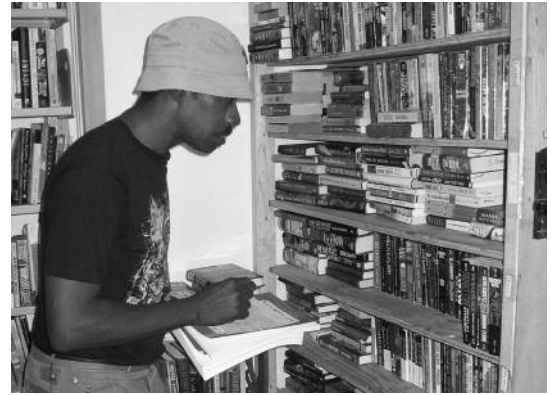
Upon entering the Riverside library for the first time, by all accounts the most well-stocked library within the PPS, we were impressed with the system the library workers (inmates who work in the library) had implemented, especially considering their limited resources and their lack of professional training or experience. A little more than half a dozen bookshelves housed the library's collection of fiction and non-fiction titles, books that had been donated to the PPS and organized in a consistent albeit rudimentary way (for example, books starting with the word "The" had been shelved together). *(continued on page 4)*

Volunteer Profiles

Why do you volunteer with Books Through Bars?



I like volunteering here because I get to meet different people.... I like being around people who want to make a difference in other people's lives. Just knowing you can do something to help out others is a good thing... it's good that I can come here and find books the guys are requesting. —*Michael*



I like books, I'm a lover of knowledge and information. And I'm encouraged by the inmates who are using their time in prison to improve themselves. Knowing that Books Through Bars has a wealth of books and information, it's great to come here and be able to share that with people in prison. —*Ray*

Our Accomplishments 2008-09

Books Through Bars just closed its 2008-09 fiscal year. Here's a "snapshot" of our accomplishments of the past 12 months.

- Sent over 5,000 book packages to individual prisoners in PA and other states in the Mid-Atlantic region
- Started monthly book deliveries and programming at Philadelphia's Riverside Correctional Facility (see article on page 1) and delivered or mailed 30 large book donations to other prison, jail, and halfway-house libraries
- Provided ongoing service-learning activities to three youth groups and hosted 19 one-time service groups
- Provided tailored book packages and ongoing support for prisoners in PA who tutor and mentor others or who are working to forward personal educational goals

Criminal Justice Issues

Sentencing Juveniles to Life Without Parole Currently Under Examination at State and National Levels

As a state, Pennsylvania holds the unenviable record of sentencing more juveniles to serve life without the possibility of parole (JLWOP) than any other state in the nation. According to data collected in October 2008, a full ten percent (or 444) of Pennsylvania's lifers (4,547 in total) were juveniles at the time of their sentencing. Pennsylvania has no minimum sentencing age; if you are a resident of Pennsylvania who is under the age of 18 and charged with murder, it is extremely rare that you will not be tried as an adult. While every client's attorney in such a case has the right to appeal for a "decertification" hearing that could potentially reassign it to the juvenile courts, not all lawyers elect to pursue one.

In sentencing juveniles to life without parole, we see the same tendencies for disproportionate sentencing of people of color that are all too evident in the prison system generally. Seventy percent, or 308, juvenile lifers in Pennsylvania are African American, 20% (90) are white, and 9% (42) are Latino. In California and Pennsylvania, an African American youth is 20 times more likely to receive a sentence of life without the possibility of parole than a white youth even though African Americans make up less than 15% of these states' youth population. These statistics, while not identical, are remarkably similar throughout the country.

In 2005, in the case of *Roper v. Simmons*, the United States Supreme Court (in a 5-4 decision) ruled to abolish the imposition of the death penalty on juvenile offenders. In reaching its conclusion, the court cited evidence attesting to a juvenile's diminished responsibility and culpability. Neurological research referenced in the courtroom showed that adolescents are physiologically and developmentally more susceptible to peer pressure, less able to exhibit self-control, and less able to make decisions based on the results of their actions.

With this precedent as a guidepost, prison reform advocates are now seeking to extend that ruling to include the elimination of JWLOP sentences as well. They argue that a child who cannot legally vote, run for office, marry, purchase cigarettes, possibly drive, or enter into a contract, should not be sentenced to spend the rest of their natural lives in prison for committing or participating in a terrible act as a juvenile. They are asking the public and our elected officials to consider what it says about our society that we are willing to deem these young people adults in no other regard than for the purposes of meting out punishment upon them.

In June of 2009, the House of Representatives heard the latest testimony in a series of hearings about the Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act (HB 2289), which seeks to "enact laws and adopt policies to grant child offenders who are serving a life sentence a meaningful opportunity for parole." (*continued on page 6*)

LETTERS TO BTB

My favorite book you sent me is "Learn HTML in 21 Days." I have read it four times, and plan to read it many more...The way Laura Lamay (the author) takes this complicated subject and makes it so easy to understand is truly incredible...If I were to try and explain how great your program is, it would be a book in itself...the closest words I can think of are HEAVEN SENT!

- J.Q., an incarcerated person in PA

The Library Project *(continued from page 1)*

From the outset, our mission was not to present our ideas or methods in a paternalistic or aggressive way. We are committed to having our relationship with the library workers and the patrons be one of mutual respect, and we attempt to include them during every step of the process of transforming their library into a space where their information needs can be better met. As one library worker remarked: "I have enjoyed being part of the growth of the library [and] helping with the distribution of books."

We do not decide what the women should or would want to read. Each month we put out a suggestion list and let the inmates communicate to us what titles or subjects they're interested in. Although we can't fill every request, the number of books in the subjects that the women are most interested in (urban and historical fiction, parenting, religion, Black Studies and books in Spanish) has grown exponentially and we've been able to bring in many titles that the women have requested. And it's not just the quantity of books that has improved, but the quality. Many of the books that comprised the Riverside collection before the Library Project began were outdated, damaged, or of little interest to the women. As we have begun weeding these books from the collection circulation has increased. A library worker explains:

Many inmates have become very interested in checking books out now that there is a larger selection to choose from. It seems that they are enjoying the choices that they now have between Fiction, Urban Fiction, Science Fiction, Romance, Black Studies, Women's Studies, Spanish Books, Traveling, Cooking and the Religious section.

There is a palpable excitement amongst the inmates, guards, administrators, and us as we collectively watch both the library's collection and the inmates' desire to read grow. But there is still much work to be done. Skill share workshops, readers' advisory, a zine collection, and new bookshelves are all goals that we've set for the immediate future. Winter will also hopefully see us expand our program into more facilities.

Support the Riverside Library Project!

Donate books (NO HARDCOVER!)

Black studies, women's studies, urban novels, softcover reference, books in Spanish, classics and new fiction, crafts and hobbies, and quality books of all kinds!

Volunteer

If you are a librarian or have experience working in libraries and would like to help with this project, please contact us at info@booksthroughbars.org for more information and a volunteer application.

As the rate of incarceration remains high and budgets for prison libraries decrease, the Library Project recognizes the undeniable link between education and recidivism and seeks to provide prisoners in Philadelphia with an opportunity to read and learn. As one inmate remarked: "[Reading] give[s] an inmate a more positive outlook and something to look forward to when they leave the Facility. Reading is definitely a necessity."

Words from the Inside

A Black Man Talks of Pain

by Gregory D. Moore

I have sown inside me all the light
in my prison cell.

I have planted words of life deep
within my soul,

In hope that the guards and prison officials
would recognize my reform.

I pray with thoughts of freedom,
every second of the day and night.

I scatter seeds of my thoughts like flowers,
enough to reach outside these prison walls.

But my reaping gives only more seeds of thought,
to sow and spread with cries of justice.

I am a Black Man full of pain,
because I cannot demonstrate my value.

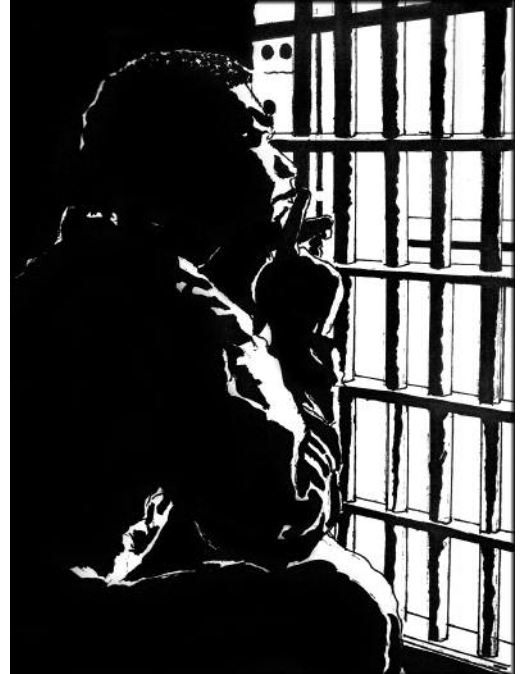
I am a Black Man full of pain, begging to show my
appreciation for the life that I once disregarded.

So, I talk of my pain as an incarcerated Black Man,
by sowing my thoughts and words as seeds.

Like a young cougar caught in a snare, I groan that
someone might hear my cry and come to my aid.

For I am a Black Man full of pain.

(from the manuscript *Eyes of Dirt: The Illustrated
Grassroots Poems of a Prisoner*)



Solitude in Darkness by Herbert A. Edwards

LETTERS TO BTB

I am truly thankful for the dictionary and thesarus. The other book you sent was wonderful and somewhat different from what I am used to reading, but allowed me to broaden my reading range.

—M.B., an incarcerated person in PA.

Sentencing Juveniles to Life (continued from page 3)

Local prison justice advocate Anita Colon (whose brother Robert "Saleem" Holbrook is currently serving a JLWOP sentence in Pennsylvania) was among those to offer testimony before the assembled subcommittee. She noted:

Although my initial concern over juveniles sentenced to Life without the Possibility of Parole came as a result of my brother's conviction, after truly researching this issue, I became an advocate for juvenile justice, dedicated to this cause, and I am speaking to you today on behalf of the approximately 2,500 juveniles currently sentenced to die in prison throughout the United States.... The United States is currently the only country in the world known to have children sentenced to and serving life without the possibility of parole. This alone tells me that there is something wrong with this policy.

A recent joint report from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, titled *The Rest of Their Lives*, modifies Anita Colon's observations only slightly; the rest of the world, according to their report, contains 12 juveniles serving such a sentence. The report concurs with her entirely when she notes that such policies violate customary international law and are expressly prohibited by Article 37(a) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC). The United States and Somalia are currently the only countries that have refused to ratify this treaty.

National Statistics on JLWOP

- In the United States as a whole, there are currently 2,484 individuals serving life sentences without parole for crimes they committed when they were under 18 years old.
- 82% of juveniles tried as adults in the U.S. are children of color.
- 59% of juveniles sentenced to life without parole had no prior convictions.
- 26% of juvenile lifers were convicted of felony murder, which is a non-homicide felony where the juvenile is held responsible when a co-defendant commits murder.
- U.S. sentencing of juvenile lifers violates three United Nations' resolutions: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Right, The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and The Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Beyond this summer's hearings and collection of testimony, other important events are also on the horizon that will present opportunities for the reconsideration of this practice nationally. This very October, the U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to make decisions on two cases (*Sullivan v. Florida* and *Graham v. Florida*) each of which challenges the constitutionality of parole-free life sentences for kids under 18. Because this coming year may well be a critical one for new decisions around this issue, it requires each and every one of us to become more informed about and attentive to the ongoing progress of these debates, contestations, and conversations.

Statistical information referenced in this article was gleaned from a variety of sources including: the JLWOP fact sheet produced by the Pennsylvania Prison Society; transcripts of testimony given before the U.S. House Subcommittee On Judiciary, Crime, and Homeland Security on June 9, 2009 regarding House Bill 2289; selected columns by Robert "Saleem" Holbrook (currently serving a JLWOP sentence within the Pennsylvania prison system); and Matt Shroud's July 29, 2009 article in the Philadelphia City Paper titled "Little Kid, Life Sentence."

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

BTB Featured in the Philadelphia Inquirer

Books Through Bars was featured on the first page of the Philadelphia Inquirer's local news section on September 14th. In case you missed it, here's an excerpt from the article. Visit our website, www.booksthroughbars.org, to read the entire article.

Help for prisoners looking to turn a new page

By Wallace McKelvey For *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

While serving time inside the concrete walls of Forest State Correctional Institution in Marienville, Pa., James Bixon received one package — a dictionary and three paperback novels — that meant the world to him.... [S]ince his release, Bixon has shown up to volunteer at the cramped West Philadelphia headquarters of Books Through Bars, an organization that sends requested books to inmates and donates material to underfunded prison libraries. "I knew I wanted to come back and help," he said. "The guys need this type of connection to the outside."

Call for Packing Materials

We need your used Tyvek envelopes and brown paper bags!

Our source for free packing materials has become less reliable, and in order to save costs in the face of rising US Postal Service rates, we're looking for all the free packing materials we can get. Legal or larger-sized Tyvek envelopes and standard brown paper grocery bags are great for wrapping up books securely. Please contact us to set up a donation time, or come by during our book packing hours (Tuesdays 7:30-9:30pm, 1st and 3rd Saturdays 11am-2pm).

LETTERS TO BTB

I hesitated to write this letter. I know you are all very busy and the irony did not escape me that I am providing you with one more letter to open! But I just had to write and tell you how enormously grateful I am and thank you for the books that you sent me recently... Not only do I get to enjoy the books, but your gift continues giving as I donate the books to the library...Please thank everyone involved

C. R., an incarcerated person in PA



Members of the Garner family recently spent part of their family reunion volunteering at Books Through Bars.

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

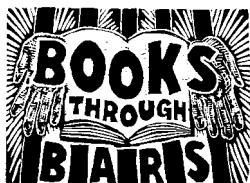
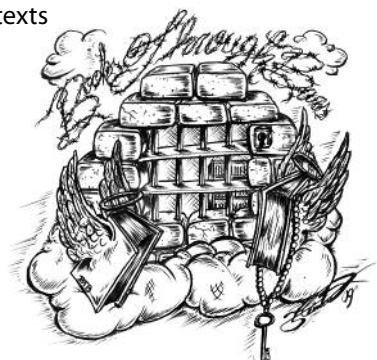
For all categories, paperback books are greatly preferred (many prisons don't accept hardback). We do not need: fiction that is hardback, romance novels, out-of-date texts or reference books, any books that are very old or in poor condition.

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



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