

btb

books through bars

fall 2010

vol. 11

20TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY! See center spread for story.

Broad Street Ministry Youth Volunteer at BTB

For the past two summers, Books Through Bars has partnered with Broad Street Ministry (BSM) in a youth service project. Program staff at BSM spoke with us about why volunteering with BTB is an important part of their program.



BTB: Describe the project through which Broad Street Ministries brings youth to volunteer with BTB.

BSM: Broad Street Ministry brings youth to BTB through its Summer Youth Initiative. This program is designed to give church youth groups from around the country an immersive experience in the city of Philadelphia. Through work with various community organizations, we hope the youth will experience a sense of systems at work that create injustice, rather than just individuals making bad decisions.

BTB: Why is BTB a valuable service project for these youth?

BSM: It's such a meaningful and valuable site for the youth because they get to sense a connection to those incarcerated and because of the variety of work. The work at BTB combines getting your hands dirty (wrapping packages, rooting through and selecting books) with a serious intellectual engagement that enables everyone to feel that they are accomplishing something.

BTB: What do participants say that they take away from their experience at BTB?

BSM: The youth always come away from an experience at BTB thinking differently about those who are incarcerated. The comments all point to a humanizing in their mind of a group of people that is regularly denied humanity. This transformation plays out in comments about handwriting, taste in books, or how polite the tone of the letter is. Further, the youth get a sense of connection to the people writing letters as they search to find books that the letter-writer will like. We always had such a wonderful experience at BTB and we're very grateful to have you as community partner.



Eagle Scout Works to Help BTB

Lage Crawley, with the support of his mother Louise, organized a hugely successful book drive as part of his Eagle Scout project.

New Leadership Volunteers Help BTB Grow

As you probably know, Books Through Bars is a volunteer-led organization. ALL of our work — from wrapping books to writing grants — is shared among a pool of dedicated unpaid workers. We'd like to introduce you to a few of them.



Ben and Sally Fritzon

Sally and Ben take the concept of “family volunteering” to a whole new level. This mother-son team has been volunteering with BTB for over six years, as a family (along with dad Rich) and with groups from Main Line Unitarian Church. They have attended our drop-in volunteering sessions, organized book drives and fundraisers, and talked about BTB to just about everyone they know. They even made a BTB packing session a part of their family reunion last year! Most recently, they have taken on the job of being BTB's daytime volunteer coordinators. Each Wednesday, they visit the office to host our daytime volunteers, stamp packages, respond to book requests, and sort and shelve donations.

Ben encourages others to get involved with BTB because “The organization is very well run and every task provides an easy way to make a difference in someone's life.” Sally says that the most rewarding part of volunteering with BTB is “finding just the right book for an inmate, whether it be a common book like a dictionary or something obscure like a book on landscaping. There is also the emotional aspect of reading a letter from a prisoner - a connection - seeing a brief bit of their life.”

If you have daytime availability on Wednesdays, Ben and Sally would like to meet you! Contact us at volunteers@booksthroughbars.org for details.



Iresha Picot

Iresha is one of the new members of the Books Through Bars collective. She began volunteering with BTB a few years ago as part of the Temple student group GLUE (Graduate Leaders in Urban Education). Working with BTB was a great fit for Iresha, as she was already interested in the importance that literacy held in prisoners' lives through her personal explorations of such texts as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Soledad Brother*.

Iresha's extensive background in education has made her an invaluable part of our service-learning team, helping to create curricula for high school student volunteers. She is also involved with the Philadelphia Prison Library Project and recently organized the Malcolm X dictionary drive, which has already brought in dozens of copies of BTB's most-requested book. Iresha also works with a number of other community organizations, including the Human Rights Coalition, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in Philly, and the “Free the Move 9” campaign.

“I feel honored to take on a volunteer leadership position at Books Through Bars,” Iresha shares. “It is definitely an organization unlike any other.”

Criminal Justice Issues

PA Bans Shackling of Women Prisoners during Childbirth

by Emily Abendroth

Pennsylvania's women prisoners and their allies won a victory in early July when the state passed Act 45, prohibiting the shackling of prisoners during childbirth. Although the measure was initially introduced two years ago by Sen. Daylin Leach (D-Delaware/Montgomery) at the urging of grassroots activists and women's health advocates, it took many long months for the bill to be approved.

Prior to the act's passage, pregnant women prisoners in Pennsylvania sometimes found themselves in the difficult — and arguably torturous — position of being in labor and bound by ankle shackles, handcuffs, and even belly chains that connected their wrists and feet together. The dangers associated with these widespread prison policies have led the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists, the American Medical Association, and the American Public Health Association to publicly declare their opposition to such practices.

Act 45 prohibits the shackling of pregnant prisoners in transit to a medical facility, during labor, and for a reasonable amount of time after labor. This includes any pregnancy-related medical distress that may occur during an incarcerated woman's term. The bill allows for exceptions in cases where it is determined that the woman "represented a substantial risk of imminent flight" or "other extraordinary medical or security circumstances." It is important to note that there are few, if any, cases that

prove the necessity of such extreme and cruel practices. Not a single instance of an incarcerated woman in labor trying to escape the hospital has been highlighted by Pennsylvania prison authorities.

Inside the Riverside Correctional Facility in Philadelphia, official prison policy regarding the use of restraints during childbirth was changed two summers ago in the wake of strong lobbying efforts on the part of the Maternity Care Coalition. However, this shift did not prevent the guards accompanying Tina Torres, who was incarcerated at Riverside at the time, from insisting that she be shackled during some 18 hours of labor — five months after Philadelphia prisons had supposedly banned the practice. Today, there is hope on the part of human rights advocates that, since this is now a matter of law rather than individual facility policy, there will be more accountability and a greater likelihood that the changes are adhered to.

Among the many regional advocacy organizations that rallied to support this initiative in its long path through the legislative system were: The ACLU of Pennsylvania, Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, the PA Prison Society, the PA Catholic Conference, Women's Way, Women's Law Project, Pennsylvania NOW, and the Maternity Care Coalition.

These Pennsylvania advocates for prisoner rights are not alone in choosing to confront this problem, but rather form part of a growing movement calling for a deep examination of the often negligent and indifferent medical treatment that U.S. women prisoners receive.

(continued on page 6)

LETTERS TO BTB

I do not get much mail, so it means a lot to get books from your organization... and of course I pass the books on to other inmates since we do not have a library here.

—Steven, a prisoner in MD

New Book Donation Location in South Philly!

The Grindcore House, Philadelphia's new all-vegan coffee house, is now a drop-off point for Books Through Bars in South Philly (1515 S. 4th St.). Email david@grindcorehouse.com to make donation arrangements.

BTB Celebrates 20th Anniversary

In 1990, New Society Publishers, a small press focused on peace and justice, received a letter from a prisoner asking if they had any damaged books they'd be willing to donate. Todd Peterson, an NSP employee, responded with a package of books. No one could have imagined that this simple

act of kindness would be the start of an organization that's still going strong 20 years later.

The world looks a lot different than it did 20 years ago — but the realities of incarceration in our nation are dishearteningly similar. Over 2 million people are currently

1990

Overwhelmed with requests for books beyond the scope of NSP's catalog, Todd Peterson and a few other members of the West Philly community form Books Through Bars.



BTB begins meeting and storing books at the newly-formed A-Space community center.



Sorting a book donation at A-Space

1991

First "Pack-a-Thon" fundraiser is held. The number of letters received continues to increase.

1994

As part of Scribe Video Center's "Community Visions" project, the BTB collective creates an award-winning short film focused on the need for education in prison.

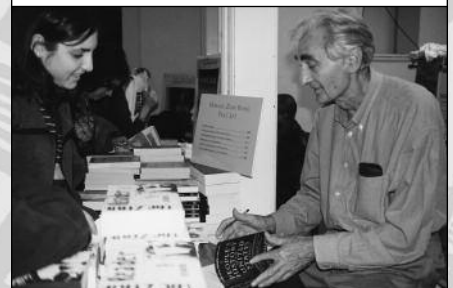
1997

1998

BTB's Contexts project publishes "Insiders Art: The Contexts Collection by Artists in Prison" and hosts several exhibits of prisoner art. Books Through Bars is now receiving over 500 book requests a month.



Noted author, researcher and activist Howard Zinn visits Philadelphia to speak at a benefit event for BTB. Over 800 people come to hear Zinn and learn about BTB's work.



Howard Zinn autographs A People's History of the United States at BTB benefit.



Volunteers get books past prison bars

BY ALICE WELLS
Monthly Press Staff

Seven years ago, a clerk in a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, prison started sending donor books to prisoners who were asking for books.

At the time, the prison was an open-air facility and the books were sent to the prisoners in a small box. The books were mostly fiction, but some were non-fiction. The prisoners loved the books and started sending letters to the donor.

The prison's local chapter of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) started sending books to the prisoners. The NEH is a federal agency that provides grants for research and education. The NEH has been supporting the project since it started.

The project has been successful. The prisoners have received thousands of books. The project has also helped to educate the prisoners. The prisoners have learned about the world and themselves. The project has also helped to build a sense of community among the prisoners.

The project is now a well-known and successful program. It has helped to improve the lives of the prisoners and has also helped to educate the public about the needs of prisoners.



An article about BTB from 1996

behind bars in the United States. An estimated 70% of these prisoners did not graduate high school, and 40% are functionally illiterate, unable to read and write at a level necessary for full functioning in our increasingly complex society. Letters from prisoners without access to quality reading materials continue to pour in, as budgets for prison education programs and libraries continue to be slashed.

So as we celebrate our accomplishments, we keep in

mind a larger goal — that one day, our services won't be needed. We imagine a world where education is a right, rather than a privilege, for all people; where imprisonment and other punitive measures aren't the primary responses to law-breaking; and where the root causes of crime — racism, ineffective public education, under-employment — are acknowledged and addressed. Thank you for your support in helping us work towards these goals.

2002

2003

2004

2007

2009

2010

BTB becomes a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

BTB organizes and hosts the first-ever gathering of representatives from prison book programs across North America. Conference participants come from 16 programs in the US and Canada.

BTB begins providing library services at Philadelphia's Riverside Correctional Facility for Women.



Contexts hosts "Creativity in Confinement" show at the Esther Klein gallery, gaining coverage in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and attracting hundreds of visitors. BTB is now receiving an average of 1,300 book requests each month.

Magazine

The Philadelphia Inquirer

WWW.PHILLY

Art can give prisoners a sense of freedom behind bars. An exhibition in West Philadelphia throws their wit, insight, emotion and virtuosity.



Charles Lee Johnson, 'The Artist' (2002) (Painted by Philadelphia Prisoners)

Unfettered IMAGINATION

The *Inquirer* wrote an in-depth story about the Contexts show at the Klein gallery.

Barbara Hirshkowitz, a founding member of BTB, the organization's long-time treasurer, and curator of the Contexts Collection, passes away.



Barbara lives on in the mural painted on the outside of the building housing the A-Space.

BTB celebrates 20th anniversary



The Books Through Bars Collective today

Ban on Shackling (continued from page 3)

In the fall of 2008, the Federal Bureau of Prisons banned the shackling of women prisoners during childbirth at all federal institutions. Nine other states in addition to Pennsylvania have prohibited such practices either as a matter of state law or prison policy.

Today's advocates are forced to enter this debate with startlingly little access to information from either the authorities or facilities that hold these women "under their care." Indeed, no one is sure just how many incarcerated women give birth each year; nor is anyone able to accurately report just

how widespread shackling is. The very invisibility of these basic facts represents the difficulties women prisoners face within the current system. As local journalist Daniel Denvir writes, "The persistence of shackling owes less to active political support for the policy than to our society's general impassivity when it comes to recognizing prisoners' humanity."

Most women prisoners are still parted from their babies at birth. There are likewise only a few prison nurseries located in U.S. jails across the country. Thus, while the ban on shackling is important, many human rights groups are also making it a priority to try to reduce the number of pregnant women in prison period, especially since most of the women incarcerated at facilities like Philadelphia's Riverside are either being held in pretrial detention or serving short sentences for minor crimes.

The population of women prisoners has increased by a staggering 800% in the thirty years between 1977 and 2007 (according to the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice statistics). Nationally, approximately two-thirds of these women are serving time for nonviolent offenses.

Approximately two-thirds of female state prisoners are mothers of a minor child. These millions of children with incarcerated parents are more likely to suffer physical and emotional health problems, struggle in school, and potentially, one day wind up in prison themselves.

In April of this year, Carol Petraitis, director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania's Duvall Reproductive Freedom Project commented that, "All women, including those who are incarcerated, deserve to be treated with dignity when they bring a child into the world." Certainly this is a point that can be agreed upon and one which was unquestionably supported by the unanimous passage of Act 45. And yet, as we fight for better maternity care for female prisoners, we must also continue to raise the bar concerning where and how and to whom these rights will be extended. In other words, these women, like all human beings, deserve to be treated with dignity even when they are not bringing a child into the world.

LETTERS TO BTB

I am 25 years old and have been incarcerated since the age of 17. I am due for release early next year... over the this period of incarceration, I have grown from an uneducated child to a relatively responsible and principle-centered adult, with 33 college credits and every aspiration of becoming a biologist... Reading has brought me this far and will continue to direct me in a successful future. That is why I applaud you for the gifts you are delivering to so many.

—Nathaniel, a prisoner in NY

You Can Help BTB Support Prisoner Literacy!

- Visit us during our drop-in volunteer hours *(see back cover for details)*
- Share your skills with us! Are you an IT expert? A great networker? A stellar writer? We need you!
- Share this newsletter with your friends and family, and let them know about the importance of prisoner education
- And as always, your donations of money, books, and packaging materials are greatly needed and appreciated!

“Bring Down the Walls!” Read-a-Thon

In March, Books Through Bars hosted a day-long “Read-a-Thon.” The event was part of *Bring Down the Walls!*, a month-long series of discussions and exhibits focused on prison issues. Participants read about and joined in facilitated discussions on prisoner health (physical and mental), women in prison, specific issues facing transgender and gender non-conforming people behind bars, re-entry of former prisoners, and the school to prison pipeline. Over 60 people participated in reading and discussion over the course of the day. The event raised funds and, more importantly, awareness about prison issues.

Project Serving County Prison Libraries Expands Reach

2010 has been a busy year for BTB's Philadelphia Prison Library Project (PPLP). We have continued to provide monthly book deliveries and volunteer librarian services at Riverside, the Philadelphia Prison System's facility for women. In addition, we were able to expand some of our services to the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center (PICC), a facility that houses both adult and juvenile male inmates. Although thus far we've only been selecting and delivering books to the two library spaces housed at PICC, we've discussed the possibility of helping with organizational and cataloging tasks with some of the prison administrators.

Malcolm X Dictionary Drive

While incarcerated, Malcolm X sought knowledge by reading the entire dictionary from front to back. Each month, Books Through Bars receives hundreds of requests for dictionaries from prisoners.

If you would like to donate dictionaries, please drop them off Tuesdays between 7:30 - 9:30pm or the 1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month between 11am - 2pm at the Books through Bars office, 4722 Baltimore Ave, Philadelphia, PA 19143. Dictionaries can also be mailed to this address.

We are also collecting dictionaries at the African American Studies Department of Temple University, 1115 Pollet Walk, 810 Gladfelter Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

For more information or to request alternate drop off options, please contact 215-727-8170 or Iresha.Picot@gmail.com

We're in the process of bringing new bookshelves into Riverside to better house the library's expanding collection, as well as trying to schedule a series of events that would bring local authors into the prison to give readings and answer questions. We have introduced new categories to our collection based on requests by the women, including LGBTQ studies, horror novels, and Spanish language books.

In May, we received a book drive proposal from the Women In Prison Project, a new group formed by a number of local judges. They collected numerous boxes of quality reading material for the women of Riverside. We'd love to work with other groups who can support us in this way.

Unfortunately, groups like the PPLP (and Books Through Bars in general) are needed more and more each day. The traditional institutions seeking to meet the educational and recreational reading needs of prisoners, namely public libraries and the prison system itself, are increasingly unable to provide these needs. Please email david@booksthroughbars.org if you'd like to volunteer with or donate books for the PPLP.

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:

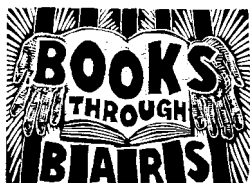
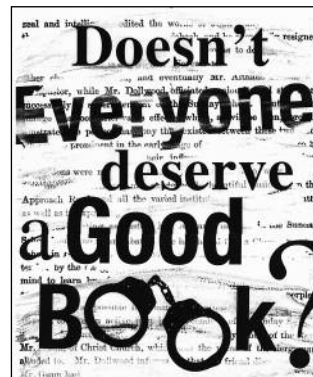
www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/donate-books
or call 215-727-8170

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