

Spring, 2015

Dear All of You Who Make Our Work Possible:

It is Spring! And aren't we all ready for renewal and new beginnings? Companions is also celebrating renewals and new beginnings. And it is happening because of your help.

In the body of this newsletter, you have read the very good news that we are once again offering Aunt Mary's Storybook Project (AMSB) to the women's division at Cook County Jail where this important project started. That happened because of the hard and persistent work of Karen, our former Executive Director, and of Scott, our present Executive Director. We are able to supply the needs of that program because so many people have donated books, mailing supplies, and postage money.

Another spring renewal news is that we are very close to giving families who receive the precious AMSB packages the option of downloading the recordings of the parents reading the books onto their computers, mobile devices, or tablets. We are very aware that CD players are becoming scarcer and we want to make sure this project is ahead of the technological curve.

The new beginning news is that we are now offering AMSB to women at Kendall and DeKalb County on a regular basis. In 2014, we sent books to 1430 children. Can you picture each one enjoying the wonder of good literature?

Because of our expansions, we expect to serve even more children in 2015. And that is where you can help. Would you be willing to send us a donation or to hold a book drive or fundraiser at your church or organization? Your donation in any amount will be deeply appreciated by us and by those we serve.

- \$250: Purchase 25 beautiful new books and mail 40 packages
- \$100: Postage for 30 packages
- \$50: Purchase beautiful new books for 5 children and mail 8 packages
- \$25: Purchase beautiful new books for 5 children

May you and yours be richly blessed during this wonderful season! Please let us know if you are aware of people we might serve.

With gratitude,

Scott and Jana
(630) 481-6231

VOLUNTEERS, YOU ARE NEEDED

Every year after our Christmas cards are mailed, we receive notes and letters of gratitude like this one, *"I really have not words to describe the warmth I've felt through the Christmas cards you sent Thank each of you from within my heart for caring."* It is clear that those little acts of concern have a deep effect on many of the recipients.

However, every year we hear from some people who tell us how much they appreciate the fact that people who don't know them are willing to send a card. But, they go on to say what they really need is a person willing to write to them on a regular basis. A personal pen pal can help them stay in touch with reality. It offers the person in prison an outlet from the negative boring sometimes violent environment in which they live.. Such a correspondence can offer them the opportunity to grow mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. It helps to contradict the message they receive in so many ways that there is no one they can trust.

I, personally, have been corresponding with people since 1976. It was through my first correspondence that I heard God calling me to this ministry. It is through my on-going opportunities to write to people who are incarcerated, that I learn so much and often am inspired. My pen pals offer me tremendous prayer support.

As you may know, we have developed a model for pen pal clubs whose members would each correspond one-on-on with a prisoner. We at present only have two such clubs operating, and our list of those people in prison seeking pen pals is growing longer each day.

Would you please talk to a few people in your church, organization, group of friends, or community about starting a pen pal club? It would mean so much to us and those we serve. Remember you will use our return address, and we have wonderful training materials. *(Continued on pg. 2)*

Insidenotes

Volunteers, You Are Needed	pg. 1-2
Board Profile	pg. 2
Gift Wrapping Fundraiser	pg. 3-4
AMBS Update	pg. 5
25 Years Celebration	pg. 6

NEEDS

- ◆ Postal Stamps.
- ◆ Large manila envelopes for mailing books to children.
- ◆ Packing tape.
- ◆ Items to sell at a summer garage sale. If you live near or deliver to Joliet for a far western suburb, please consider donating items for this event.

BOARD PROFILE



(Continued from pg. 1)

Being present to a person in prison can make a big difference. One prisoner expressed it this way, *“When you have someone writing to you regularly it really does affect a person’s whole attitude and outlook.”* Another wrote, *“Mail call is the hardest part of my day.”*

Finally, we received this quote in a letter of thank you: *“Every letter and/or card that I receive is special to me. It’s important to have a spiritual support team as well as for me to be able to write. At times, it helps me to leave this place and to get out of my circumstances by focusing on someone else.”*

For those of you who are in prison reading this, I ask that you pray for our readers and those who are considering this opportunity. Your prayers can make a difference.

Jana Minor

BOARD PROFILE: DEANA

As a new Board member at CJT, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I was born and raised on the Northside of Chicago, and I am a wife and mother of two young boys. My passion lies in social justice, urban education and educational policy. I have extensive education and professional experience in early childhood education and family literacy. Recently, I was selected one of five of the 2013-15 Illinois Early Childhood Policy Fellows, which is a diversity-driven program that prepares new leaders to strengthen the field of early childhood policy and systems building in Illinois. I also have expertise in educational administration and non-profit management and I am often described as a woman who has dedicated her career fighting for quality-comprehensive child-family services in Illinois and social change.

What inspired you to join the Board?

A long-time friend introduced me to Companions many years ago. In the past, I have volunteered for past events that benefited Companions families. There is so much work to be done here in Chicago dealing with social justice and changing systems that I am trying to align myself with other advocates. I felt compelled to join the Board because I believed in the organization’s mission and vision. Companions is an organization that definitely changes lives and uplifts the human spirit.

What do you hope to accomplish during your term as a Board member?

My overall goals during my term as a Board member is to help strengthen the organization with strategic planning, new fresh ideas, assist with fundraising efforts, and to participate with the Aunt Mary's Storybook Project. I also want to help build more awareness around the continued rise of youth incarceration. As the mission states, Companions Journeying Together provides a forum to personally impact the emotional, spiritual, and social lives of the incarcerated and their families. I am proud to be a Board member, fighting for restorative justice and representing the organization through its mission, vision and values.

CHRISTMAS GIFT WRAPPING FUNDRAISER



A Reflection by Jenny

About 6 or 7 years ago, my mom told me that Companions was starting a fundraising committee and asked if I would be interesting in attending a couple of meetings. In the past, I had only ever been a person that donated to charities. I had never gotten actively involved. As the meetings were really just going to be brainstorming sessions for new ways in which to raise funds, I decided to give it a try.

I arrived at that first meeting with a couple of ideas, one of which has taken off like none of the others: gift wrapping. Borders's website advertised that if you were a charity that promoted literacy, you could sign up to come into any Borders store to wrap people's purchases for donation. That first year we signed up for a couple of days and raised a couple hundred dollars. The next year we signed up for more days at various Borders locations to raise even more .

Then, sadly, Borders filed for bankruptcy and closed all of their store locations. Would this be the end of gift wrapping? Are there other stores that would allow us to continue this fundraiser?

I have no idea what made me write to different malls to see if they would be interested in having us provide a gift wrapping service to their patrons while asking for donations in return. The response was overwhelming, "Yes, we allow charities to do this, but we are all booked this year." Fox Valley, however, wrote back that they still had an opening for Christmas Eve if we were interested in signing up. They would provide tables and gift boxes. We would have to supply everything else.

Not knowing exactly what to expect, we showed up with 30 rolls of wrapping paper, 2 pairs of scissors, and 2 tape dispensers. At around noon, we got slammed and stayed that way for 11 hours. We went to stores near us to borrow scissors. I called my husband to bring us more paper. We even enlisted the help of some of the people having their presents wrapped to fold the gift boxes that the mall provided. We were tired, hungry, and our feet hurt. But we raised almost \$1000 that day and knew that a mall is where we had to be.

The next year, we contacted Fox Valley early enough to do multiple days. The next year we expanded to multiple days at two different malls. We kept expanding until gift wrapping had evolved into what it is today—a monster fundraiser that utilizes over 50,000 square feet of paper and 50+ volunteers over 10 different days to cover the entire holiday season.

FUNDRAISER CONTINUED



I am still surprised that my little idea of wrapping books for a couple of hours at Borders has morphed into this amazing fundraiser. Never in my wildest imagination did I think that I could have such an impact on the lives of others.—Jenny

Maybe someone is reading this right now who has his/her own little fundraising idea, but doesn't know where to begin or have the people to help run it. Please contact us. We are always looking for new ways to get people involved, expand volunteer opportunities, and create a sense of committee within our organization. If you come up with the idea, we will help carry that idea to fruition.

Thanks so much to Jenny for her very hard work on our Christmas gift wrapping fund raisers. She with the help of all of your volunteers have made this fundraiser a great success for us. Thank you also to all of our volunteers including those from Kohl's Associates Care and the Chicago Ridge Mall for providing us space and all who donated paper, bows and other supplies. We are very grateful.—Jana



Three birthday Cards a Day

Our volunteer, Deborah, prepares that many birthday cards to send to people who often receive no other Birthday cards. In fact, one man wrote us recently that it was the first birthday card he had ever received. Deborah also adds a beautiful message about the wonder of us each having our own special day. Another man wrote recently of his gratitude to Deborah who had sent him cards for several years. He was especially touched that she had always found him at as he was transferred from prison to prison. Never forget that every act of kindness you offer to another makes a difference.

Facebook Friends

Please become our Facebook friend so you can stay current with all of our activities and needs. Go to facebook.com/cjtinc and click the "like" button!



We're Expanding!

We are very excited about bringing our Aunt Mary's Storybook project to new places and helping more children of incarcerated parents maintain their connection to their parents!

The biggest news in terms of our expansion is our return to the Cook County Jail. As you may know, we started the Aunt Mary's Storybook project at the Cook County Jail in 1993 as a Christmas project for the children of women incarcerated at Cook County Jail in Chicago. The last time we served the Cook County Jail was in July 2004, so our return in February 2015 was very special for us. In the few short months that we have been at Cook County, we were able to send books and recordings to 62 children!

In addition to our expansion to the Cook County Jail, we will also be serving the men at the DuPage County Jail. A group of volunteers have been going each month to DuPage to serve the women, but we thought serving the fathers is just as important. We hope to begin serving the men in the next several weeks after our new volunteers have been cleared by the jail.

We are also pleased to announce that we will also be working with the women at the Kendall County Jail. Up until this year, we only had the opportunity to serve the men.

Finally, we have been in an ongoing discussion with two other facilities in Northern Illinois area to bring Aunt Mary's Storybook to their imprisoned parents. Things are looking good, and we hope to be in those facilities within the next few months!

Thank you to all who have been supportive of our efforts with Aunt Mary's Storybook -- the books, CDs, envelopes, and postage funds you have been donating really makes an impact on these parents. We have learned over the years that in addition to bringing our books and recorders, we need to bring a box of tissues because of how emotional both the mothers and fathers get. The opportunity to remain connected with your family in the face of tough times can mean the world to our participants. I can tell you that many of the parents I have recorded have expressed their appreciation to all of the supporters for thinking of them and their children. So again, we sincerely thank you for continuing to give us the opportunity to do great work.



journeynotes



Companions, Journeying Together, Inc.

P.O. Box 457

Western Springs, Illinois 60558-0457

OUR GOALS ● OUR VISION ● OUR COMMITMENT

- ◆ To bridge the gaps between the free and the unfree worlds in our society.
- ◆ To implement programs that foster the personal growth of incarcerated people and their families.
- ◆ To promote family literacy, lifelong learning and positive parenting techniques
- ◆ To recruit and educate volunteers about the criminal justice system and restorative justice.

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Visit us at www.cjtinc.org*

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25 YEARS OF COMPANIONS!

The Companions staff would like to hear from you.

Scott@cjtinc.org (Executive Director)

Jana@cjtinc.org (Founding Director)

Call at (630) 481-6231 (New number)

[facebook.com/cjtinc](https://www.facebook.com/cjtinc)



An electronic version of our *JourneyNotes* publication is now available! Please visit our website at www.cjtinc.org to sign up!

NEEDS

- ◆ Postal Stamps.
- ◆ Large manila envelopes for mailing books to children.
- ◆ Packing tape.
- ◆ Items to sell at a summer garage sale. If you live near or deliver to Joliet for a far western suburb, please consider donating items for this event.