

Dear Generous Donors,

Over thirty years ago, I became acquainted with Companions Journeying Together (CJT), and its major program, Aunt Mary's Storybook (AMSB). For this project, volunteers bring children's books into several jails and prisons in Illinois and record the parent reading for their child. The recording and the book are then sent to the child. That project stirred my heart, so ten years ago when Jana Minor asked if I would join the board, I immediately agreed.

As a board member, I have enjoyed hearing about the programs sending Christmas and birthday cards to prisoners or Mother's Day packs of stationary for moms. On the board, I have been a passionate supporter of our parenting classes and worked to get funding to purchase *Parenting Inside Out*, the evidence-based parenting skills training program developed for criminal justice involved parents. I have been privileged to hear the stories from AMSB, but over the years my job schedule kept me from being an active participant in that ministry.

When in January 2015, AMSB gained access to serve the Cook County Jail, I immediately volunteered to go into the jail to help parents pick out books and record them for their children. Now I look forward to the Saturdays that I can participate more than any other volunteer activity that I have been part of.

Once a month, 16 to 18 moms or grandmothers are allowed to come into the program, but they are often not clear what they have signed up for. The women walk into the large recreation room, some looking bored, others skeptical, and a few curious about what they are getting into. Their eyes brighten as they spy the tables loaded with children's books. Although they would rather go immediately to the books, they are directed to sit and listen to our directions. You can visibly see all their eyes brighten as they understand that their child will receive not only the book they pick out but also the digital recording of their mom's voice.

After our last session at Cook County one mom wrote:

I appreciated the fact that so many kind and wonderful volunteers would come out to help me give this beautiful gift to my children. No words can describe how happy and grateful I am to them and this program. Not only did it make my day, I am sure my children will be motivated to read more especially with hearing the sound of my voice encouraging them to succeed.

Another wrote:

Awesome program! This made my day. I can't wait to talk to my son after he receives it. I read Chapter 1 and can't wait for him to tell me about the rest of the book. This program gives life to a dismal place.

I am so grateful to be able to share these intimate moments: when a mom tells her child how much she loves and misses him/her; when she explains how she picked out this special book to read and send; when she inserts her child name as she reads the story; or when she ends by singing a special song to her child. I cannot quantify the difference this time will make in the world, but I leave the jail feeling that the two or three hours I spent may be the most significant hours of my week.

AMSB receives no state or federal grants. We rely on churches, community organizations, private foundations, and mostly individual donors. Your generosity is essential for the continuing success of our program.

God bless,

Mary Ellen

Board of Directors Member

We were flooded with Christmas cards

Our volunteers are wonderful. We received Christmas cards in numbers like never before. Because of the help of hundreds of great people we were able to:

- ◆ Mail 5000 cards to prisoners.
- ◆ Send another 3000 signed cards which were distributed to each person confined at 14 prisons and jails (mostly women and juveniles).
- ◆ Provide thousands of other cards to prisoners who then sent them to their families.

Recipients also wrote wonderful letters thanking us and sharing how deeply those cards touched them. A sampling is below and on the following page:

- ◆ *"I really wish to thank each of you for not only your time and energy, but for your thoughtfulness and for thinking of me, long enough, to bring a smile to my face. Most people would view your efforts as simple pastimes, but for myself, someone who has been stripped of everything he's ever know, for over a quarter century, and someone who has learned to value the tiniest of things....Your efforts were received on an very grander scale than I can find words to express. **REALLY** I thank you all. May God give each of you more blessings than you could ever physically count."*
- ◆ *"It means so much for caring people such as you all to take the time out of your busy lives to think about me during the Holiday Season."*

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NEEDS

- ◆ Packing tape
- ◆ Large envelopes for mailing books
- ◆ Someone to help coordinate the 2016 Christmas Card project
- ◆ Names of people willing to receive JourneyNotes via email
- ◆ Volunteers for help with Aunt Mary's Storybook project

(Needs continued on last page)

CHRISTMAS CARDS & HOSPITALITY HOUSE



- ◆ *“I wanted to simply say thank you for the time all of you have invested in incarcerated individuals such as myself. I have been incarcerated now for 21 years and for as long as I can remember you have never failed to send me a Christmas card every single year. I do appreciate it very much as it reminds me that there are people in this world who still care.”*

This is also a meaningful project for our volunteers. This is what a few said:

- ◆ *“Our small prayer group looks forward to collecting appropriate Christmas cards and helping to address and stamp them every year. It helps us remember those who are incarcerated and pray for them.”*
- ◆ *“Our group is retired teachers and we have only participated in a small way with mainly contributions of cards. I think the greatest satisfaction is to extend hope to people in challenging circumstances. Letting someone know they are not abandoned or alone is another hope for the communication. Knowing a total stranger cares is a kindness that we like to pass along.”*
- ◆ *“Helping Companions with the Christmas Card project has been part of my life for many years. It always reminds me that Jesus told us “to visit those in prison” and I feel like this is my way of doing it. Anything that encourages the incarcerated in their faith and lets them know people really care for them will show them how much God loves all of us.”*
- ◆ *“Sending Christmas cards to prisoners is a very special action for us because it is a small and easy task that results in a great gift—Christ’s loving, radiant light in a bleak darkness.”*



Hospitality House

504 W. Vine St. Vienna II 62995

Serving families of prisoners incarcerated at Vienna Correctional Center or Shawnee Correctional Center \$20 per night per room. (Some rooms house two or three family members per room). Also provided are a kitchen, dining room, and living room. We are child friendly with some toys and books and DVR player/TV. A grocery store and Dollar General Store are within walking distance of the house.

Contact: Don Street, House Manager at 618-826-9810 for reservations or information

Advance reservations are required to ensure staff is available to serve you.

THANK YOU & ROTARY BOOK COLLECTION



Thank You Roger

Deacon Roger was committed to social justice and had some experience ministering to people who were imprisoned. When he heard about our pen pal clubs, he wanted very badly to bring it to his parish and convinced Shawn to found such a group. At their very first meeting, the group decided to call their group, Roger's Writers.

Roger was suffering from cancer at that point, but was a valuable presence, signed himself up to be a pen pal and was faithful to that correspondence until he died a few months ago. We are so grateful to him for all he did for others over the years and for being the inspiration for the Roger's Writers Pen Pal Club.

We Also Thank Bill

We have also lost one of our Aunt Mary's Storybook volunteers, Bill. Bill fought cancer for several years, but continued to come for his monthly visits to Kane County Jail even when he was in considerable pain. He loved working with this special project, and we were so grateful for his help. We will miss him.



Rotary Clubs Book Collection

Four Rotary Clubs in Batavia, Geneva and St. Charles collaborated with Barnes and Nobles to acquire new children's books for 5 organizations serving children. They had a table at the store in Geneva Commons and asked people to purchase books on the lists provided by each of the groups. Our Aunt Mary's Storybook Project received 60 of those books. We are also very pleased that IL Youth Center – St. Charles received a big number of books from this effort. There is a great need for all kinds of supplies at that facility which imprisons male youth.

Thanks for a great effort by these Rotarians.



Fundraiser News

We had a very successful gift wrapping fundraiser this past December! We are pleased to report that we have raised nearly \$10,000 to support Aunt Mary's Storybook project at Companions Journeying Together. We are also thankful to have raised nearly \$650 during the Carson's Community Days fundraiser at the Louis Joliet Mall. Thank you to all who came out to volunteer for these two important fundraisers! If you would like to help volunteer with or coordinate a fundraiser to support our programs, please call Scott at [\(630\) 481-6231](tel:6304816231) or email scott@cjtinc.org.

AMSB News

Our Aunt Mary's Storybook Project is expanding even more! In addition to serving several county jails in the Chicagoland area, we are excited to report that we have added Sheridan Correctional Center, Vandalia Correctional Center, and Menard Correctional Center to our roster. We are especially grateful to the administrators at Menard Correctional Center who have graciously opened up the Aunt Mary's Storybook project to the men in administrative detention and segregation. These are two populations within the Illinois Department of Corrections that traditionally do not have access to many activities and programs. In addition to serving these special populations, we will also be working with the residents on the maximum and medium security general population units. It is also great to be back at the Sheridan Correctional Center! Sheridan is unique because it is the treatment prison for the Illinois Department of Corrections and uses the therapeutic community model. People housed at Sheridan receive evidence based substance abuse treatment services. We can't wait to tell you more about our sessions at Sheridan, Vandalia, and Menard - be sure to check our next issue for more details!

New Website

We are excited to debut a new website for Companions Journeying Together! Check it out at www.cjtinc.org. There, you will find a refreshed design and much more information about our programs and services. We will be updating our blog every month with insights, stories, and perspectives from Companions staff, board members, volunteers, and allied organizations.

Log on today and let us know what you think of our new site!



Be Careful of Acting out in Fear

For years I have watched as our states and country enacted laws in the emotional aftermath of a horrible crime or in the face of fear for the safety of our children and ourselves. Too often those laws are not well thought out and end up causing great harm to many people.

Remember when we were so afraid what illegal drugs would do to our children that we adopted very very long sentences for drug offenses even for possession of a small amount of these substances. The result was that we sent enormous amounts of money building new prisons, swelled our prison populations, separated thousands and thousands of children from their parents and did little to stem the drug trade or to help people overcome their addictions.

Another example are laws we have enforced to severely restrict where people convicted of sex crimes can live, work or be after their release. Many are not even allowed to attend church because there will be children present. While there are people with very serious sexual problems that should never be around children, there are others who are much less of a danger. I worry about young men who have consensual sex with underage girls who then claim rape. For the rest of their lives, they must live under these serious restrictions. I read a few years ago of three released men who had been convicted of sex crimes who received permission to live under an underpass because they could not find housing that met the restrictions they faced. Did that really make our children safer?

Of course, we have to be aware of dangers and act responsibly to protect those we love. But we have allowed our fears to put us in corners that are very damaging to us all.

As we approach our elections this year, I ask that we all be sure that we consider how we are being manipulated by fear and choose candidates out of sound analysis which considers facts, not just rumors. We can listen to our emotions, but it will be very important that we are careful not to be ruled by them.

Jana Miars Minor

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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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

[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 CONTINUED

- ◆ Items for a live auction that will be held at our Kindred Spirits Wine and Beer Tasting.
- ◆ People to take lead at one of next year's gift wrapping sessions.
- ◆ Christmas gift wrap, bows, gift boxes, tissue paper, and tags.
- ◆ Do you know a youth group, church, school, Key Club etc. who would be willing to organize a fundraiser for us? Please let us know.

