

Dear Supporter:

Aunt Mary is smiling. Let us tell you why.

There is such a need for those in prison to have contact with positive people in the outside world. Through multiple projects and activities beginning in 1987, Companions Journeying Together builds bridges of connection. *Aunt Mary's Storybook Project* facilitates the opportunity for parents to record stories of their choosing. These recordings and the books are then sent to their children who can listen to their mothers' and fathers' voices as often as the child chooses. Recordings often include an expression of love for the child and appreciation to the caregiver.



While *Aunt Mary's Storybook* is the work for which Companions is most well-known, our volunteers and staff also organize one-on-one pen pal relationships and card writing celebrations for birthdays, Christmas and Mother's Day. CJT sends cards to those who are incarcerated and also delivers appealing cards and stationary to those in prison so the men and women can create attractive letters for their families and friends. These touches of beauty and joy mean so much to those who live in a system that strips away these aspects of their lives and to the loved ones who suffer from the imprisonment too.

Programming requires staffing and resources. Infrastructure is even more difficult for programs that occur in cooperation with the Illinois Department of Corrections and various county jails because one cannot just show up to volunteer. Following procedure is essential for Companions Journeying Together to continue to be welcomed into the 13 facilities where CJT conducts its mission. Once the staff builds and nurtures these complex relationships, then access to trained staff, reliable recording equipment, books, blank CDs, mailing supplies - especially postage - becomes critical.

Finally, Companions Journeying Together's success arises from long-term relationships with the men and women we meet in the corrections system. Potential volunteers are afraid. People don't write letters as much anymore. Yet within the past four years, a volunteer helped CJT established a model that has already grown to include seven separate sites. Each incarcerated member corresponds with a specific pen pal sharing successes, questions, hopes and dreams for the time they finally return to their families.

This was initially made possible by my (Jana's) Aunt Mary Best, an elementary school teacher, whose estate provided the initial funds that my family and I dedicated to the creation of Companions Journeying Together. Those funds were exhausted long ago, and now we turn to people like you to continue this unduplicated and vitally important work.

Now you know why Aunt Mary is smiling and in her memory CJT will continue to honor the dignity of those who are always our sisters and brothers and who must find their place in society. Companions Journeying Together is humbled at our role in helping them realize their potential, and we welcome your generous support of mission.

Sincerely,

Jana Minor & Scott McWilliams

A True Story

In recent months, I have often talked about my 103 year old mother who recently went home to God. In her last years, though she was wheel chair bound, had dementia, and could not hear, she was still doing her work for God. She maintained a lively wit, and somehow she touched those around her especially her care givers. She and Darren, whose story follows, are making a difference right where they are even though each faced many obstacles.

Darren (not his real name) was part of a strong thriving Christian community at an IL maximum security prison. He developed a deep love of Jesus and a commitment for living God's will. He directed the choir at the prison, was a frequent part of group prayer, and participated in many constructive programs. He says he witnessed much healing happening in relationships between those imprisoned in the jail, between the prisoners and the officers and even in the personal lives of the officers.

One day Darren was transferred. He was devastated. So much good was happening, and he wanted to continue to be part of it. The first night at the new prison, he prayed and cried. Finally, he heard God telling him to relax, that he was placed where God could use him and that God would always be with him. The Christian community at this prison was fractured.

Darren went to work. First he joined the choir and soon was named choir leader. He is teaching those who come to worship services that their faith walk cannot end inside the chapel walls. He is leading them to live their faith throughout every day. He has come to realize that the work he was part of at the old prison was preparing him for this new assignment God.

As we all know, when we are doing God's will as best we can, amazing things happen. Shortly before Darren reach this prison, two new wardens were assigned, both of whom wanted to change the environment and to add new programs. Thus, the way was opened for Darren.

Darren, you will know who you are as you read this. We thank God for you and for your great work.

Jana

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NEEDS (elaborated on pg. 4)

- ◆ Volunteers to organize books
- ◆ Groups to Hold Book Drives
- ◆ Opportunities to speak
- ◆ Postage Stamps
- ◆ Amazon shoppers

Gift Wrapping 2016 A Great Success

We had over \$12,600 in donations for the Aunt Mary's Storybook Project! That was the result from hours and hours of our volunteers wrapping gifts for shoppers at the Chicago Ridge Mall during Christmas season, 2016. We are so very grateful for those volunteers.

As always it was amazing, and fun, and gratifying, and exhausting. Can you imagine the amount of paper, tape, tissue paper, the number of boxes and bows that were required to result in this kind of revenue? Thank you also to everyone who collected and donated these supplies.

The administration and staff at the Chicago Ridge Mall was so very helpful especially in providing us a space which make our operation so visible and providing a nearby storage room. They have replied to our thank you note that they look forward to helping us next year. So please be on the lookout for any of those supplies we will need for this venture at Christmas, 2017.

A Christmas Card Story

Every year, we wonder if our Christmas card project is really worth all of the time, money and effort our volunteers and we put in. A story has recently surfaced that says, "Yes, Yes, it is."

This year we sent a few thousand signed cards to Cook County Jail and asked the Assistant Director to have them distributed in units where they were most needed. One of the male recipients wrote to thank us. He said that there were a lot of young men on his cell block who had never been shown any affection by family, friends or society. He believes that is what led them to drugs, gangs and guns. They were amazed, he told us, that people who they did not know would care enough to sign a card for them. A few of them were hiding their tears he claimed. It was especially important according to the letter writer that so many of the cards were signed by women because most of them had mothers who were addicted to drugs and were not capable of showing them a mother's love. If a card would be that meaningful, think of the painful lives these young men have lived.

We thank John, not his real name, for telling us this story and for his efforts to witness to these young men and to teach them to read.





SHOUT OUT, FUNDRAISER, UPDATE & CELEBRATION

A Shout Out to Jack and Mary Ellen

These two wonderful people many years ago started a Turkey Trot 5K run as a way to bring their church community together and offer a place for college students to connect with their high school friends. At some point they started donating some of the proceeds to Companions. This year's donation to us was over \$1700. Jack and Mary Ellen have decided to pass this project on. We are so very grateful for their very hard work and for remembering us for all of these years.

Wine and Cheese Fundraiser

The Vino Cellar in Lombard has again agreed to host a fundraiser for Aunt Mary's Storybook Project on Thursday, July 20th. There will be food, music, good conversation and fun, and a silent auction. Please mark this fun event on your calendar. More information to follow.

More Information to Come About a Volunteer Picnic scheduled for Saturday, September 9th and a Family Friendly Event on Saturday, October 28th.

Aunt Mary's Storybook Update

2016 was a great year for Aunt Mary's Storybook! We sent books on behalf of incarcerated parents to 2,463 children - a 35% increase from last year! Our program in 2016 served five state prisons and six county jails, which greatly expanded our reach. This year, we have been asked by three new facilities to offer Aunt Mary's Storybook inside their facilities. We continue to do the best we can to serve as many people as possible, but funding these visits is a challenge. We are in need of funding for transportation costs, postage for packages, and more books. While we received many books over the past year from many different groups, we find that they go very quickly. Our challenge for 2017 is to see if we can serve 3,000 children this year. Can you help us make that happen? Please consider supporting our continued expansion through 2017.

30th Year Celebration: Helping Prison Visiting Rooms

As part of our 30th year celebration, we are asking our supporters to help Companions Journeying Together impact the lives of incarcerated people when their family members go to the facility to visit. At a few of the Illinois Department of Corrections prisons, our focus in this year is to help improve their visitation room. We have asked several of the facilities in which we offer Aunt Mary's Storybook what their needs are, and whether they would be interested in us bringing items to them for their visiting room. The facilities are very much in need of coloring books, connect the dot books, word search books, crayons, pencils, children's books, and notebook paper (not spiral bound). If you are interested in donating these items, we have a drop off location in Western Springs. We are also happy to meet in Greater Will County, the Loop in Chicago, or the western suburbs of Chicago. Alternatively, they can be mailed to us at PO Box 457 Western Springs IL 60558. We will then donate these items to the facilities. These items will certainly make children and families who are visiting their incarcerated loved one very happy. Thank you for your support!

journeynotes



Companions, Journeying Together, Inc.

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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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30 YEARS OF COMPANIONS!

The Companions staff would like to hear from you.

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

NEEDS CONTINUED

- ◆ **Speaking Opportunities:** To tell our 30 year story.
- ◆ **Volunteers:** To help organize books.
- ◆ **Amazon shoppers:** When ordering from Amazon, go to **smile.amazon.com** and designate Companions Journeying Together as the organization you would like to support. We will receive a small percentage of the cost of your order for qualifying items.
- ◆ **Postage Stamps:** We are using more postage stamps than ever. Would your group be willing to ask its member for bring a few stamps to your next meeting?
- ◆ **Groups to Hold Book Drives:** We have been given new wonderful opportunities to offer Aunt Mary's Storybook Project. That calls for an increase in books, mailing supplies, and postage money. Do you know a group that might hold a book drive for us? We will supply guidelines.