

Dear Generous Supporters:

Our impact is profound and lasting. “Tommy” is now 17, and still has the recording and picture book that his mother sent him over a decade ago when she was incarcerated at Cook County Jail. That speaks volumes about the mission of Companions Journeying Together, the difference we make in people’s lives.

Last year, Aunt Mary’s Storybook reached over 2,000 Illinois families impacted by incarceration. Thousands of men and women received cards for Christmas and other days. Our message of hope to people in prison is clear: you are not alone.

As our mission has expanded across the state, so has our organization leadership. Recently, I succeeded Jana Minor as board chair. Believe me, Jana’s is a hard act to follow; her dedication and commitment over the years has been nothing short of remarkable, and we are deeply grateful for her leadership. As you probably know, she and her two sisters were our founders. **I am delighted that Jana will continue to serve as a board member.**

In recent weeks, we have welcomed two new board members: Kellie Mann and Robert Alexander. In this issue, we are profiling board secretary Patrick Griffin.

Elsewhere in this issue you will find two reflections from pen pal volunteers Sharee and Mary Jane. You will also find information on our Mother’s Day project, and also a tribute to Cook County Jail Superintendent Joclede Benn.

We continue to forge ahead. To evaluate the impact of our Aunt Mary’s Storybook project, we have partnered with the Executive Service Corps of Chicago to directly hear from our Aunt Mary’s Storybook families as to how to improve our services and better respond to their needs.

We are also planning our Kindred Spirits fundraiser in August - so stay tuned! This is a wonderful way to do good and have fun with the Companion community of supporters and to hear directly from prison and jail officials who witness our work firsthand in their facilities.

Your donation, big or small, will help continue this important work. Will you consider helping with a financial gift today? On behalf of all those we serve, thank you for your contribution of time and treasure. Never doubt that you are making a lasting impact. Just ask Tommy.

Gratefully,

Marcy Darin
Board Chairperson

Thanks to new board officers

Our board has an exciting new look with several new members, including three men. All are working hard to further our work. We are especially grateful for the three who have accepted officer positions:

Marci – President.

Robert – Vice President

Patrick – Secretary

And the person who will become our Treasurer.

If you would be interested in joining these great people on our board or know of someone who would be willing to be a board member, please let us know. We need committed people to carry us into the future.

Pen Pal Reflections

Companions now has about 9 pen pal groups. Some are small. Two have as many as 20 volunteers. We have long known how important mail is to prisoners. Below are reflections from two people who have found corresponding with someone who is imprisoned has enriched their lives.

From Sharee: "It is wonderful to have a pen pal," says Sharree. "I wait on pins and needles until I receive his next letter." Sharee has been writing to her pen pal for about a year. He was locked up when he was a teenager and is serving an 80 year sentence. The correspondence is also meaningful to her pen pal. He told her that he heard God speaking to him through her letters and that was something he really needed. When he first wrote to us, he said how very alone he felt. Sharree has filled a deep need in his life. Sharree says the rewards she has received are so much greater than the time and effort she puts into this correspondence. She is so proud of how her pen pal is learning and growing. He is taking advantage of several education opportunities, and they often explore the meaning of Bible verses with each other. She is touched by the depth of sharing he has done with her. She would encourage others to become pen pal volunteers.

From Mary Jane: "Starting in 2015 I began writing a prisoner who was expected to be released in 2025. Our first letters were basically getting- to- know -you letters. His likes and dislikes, what his day in prison was like and how God was helping him through this difficult time. I shared the same kind of information with him. As our correspondence continued we each shared our concerns for each other and the joys in our lives. (continued on pg. 2)

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NEEDS

- ◆ Board members
- ◆ Groups to fundraise
- ◆ Postage stamps / envelopes
- ◆ Computer project assistance
- ◆ Opportunities to speak
- ◆ Prayers



PEN PAL & MOTHERS DAY PROJECT

My goal in writing him was to provide him with support while he was in prison; to be someone he could count on to receive a letter from each month; to be someone he could vent his frustration to if he needed that. While he does get visits from a friend, I initially didn't know that and thought perhaps I could be his visitor via letters. As we continued to write each other, he shared with me the way he coped with being in prison. Since he was in a medium security prison, he was challenged sometimes by community time with other prisoners and the promise he believes that he had been given of being released in 2018. He was so certain that he would be released that he planned a BBQ and wanted me to attend. At that point I told him that my goal was to support him and try to bring joy to his life while he was in prison, but when he was released my focus would then be on another inmate. I was certain he would get angry and decide that our friendship via letters was complete. Much to my surprise he accepted my boundaries and it seemed that he respected me for setting them. He currently has taken tests that tell him his strengths and weaknesses. He sent me a copy and so I shared my thoughts with him about how he can apply those skills in a work program and his life upon release. He acknowledges he has done "some really bad things" in his life, but has selected Christ as his guide now. We talk about how he can continue with Christ as guide when he is released and how this world is quite different now than it was when he was imprisoned. I see part of my mission is to try to keep him abreast of what is happening in society. He may have a TV in his cell for entertainment, but TV isn't real life and he needs be aware of that. Our society currently marginalizes many people. My corresponding with a prisoner has given me one way to expand my understanding of those who have threatened our society and yet long for many of the same values we have."

Mail is so important. You can start a pen pal club at your church or organization. Please let me know. If you are imprisoned, we are working hard to recruit more volunteers. Our list of those wanting a pen pal remains very long. We would be willing to add your name to that list though if you are willing to be patient.

Mother's Day Project

"Thank you so much for the lovely Mother's Day cards. You always brighten up our lives. God bless you." Words from a woman who received one of the 3500 packets of stationery and cards we made available to people who are imprisoned (mostly women and juveniles) in 12 institutions. We were able to do this with donations and help from people all over the state. We are grateful to all of you.

We are also appreciate so much the churches who help preparation of these packet events:

Trinity United Methodist in Mt. Prospect
Knox Presbyterian in Naperville
St. Katherine Drexel Catholic in Sugar Grove
Grace United Methodist in Naperville

BOARD PROFILE & A WOMAN OF INTEGRITY



Get to Know Board Member Patrick Griffin:

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

I'm a Senior Program Officer at the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, where I've worked in the Justice Program for 8 years. I also teach criminology and undergrad courses part-time at Loyola University. I've been a lawyer, a writer, a researcher in delinquency, and a bunch of other things. I'm married and have two grown sons.

(2) Tell us about your work with Aunt Mary's Storybook in the Cook County Jail. How did you get involved, and what do you like most about your volunteering?

I haven't been doing it for that long, but I wanted to volunteer in part to learn more about our work. I do enjoy it, and I can see that the inmates appreciate what we do. As a father, I loved reading to my kids when they were young—I still love kids' books. So I feel like I'm getting in on that stuff again, alongside other fathers.

I'm also curious about the jail and the people in it. My foundation job is all about supporting efforts around the country to reduce jail usage—to get America to “rethink jails,” as we put it. It's useful work but it's pretty abstract most of the time. Volunteering for AMS gives me a chance to see what it's like for people inside these places.

(3) What inspired you to join the Board?

Since my job is to fund nonprofits, I thought I could be helpful. I also serve on another board—the statewide school board for kids in the custody of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice—and I thought the two might be complementary. The CJT Board has a great line-up of people now, a great range of perspectives. It's a privilege to work with them.

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

I want more people to know about us! I think there's a lot of potential support out there for the work we do. All we have to do is tell our story.

Joclede Benn – A Woman of Integrity and Vision

It was 1993 when we approached Superintendent Joclede Benn who ran the Women's Division at the Cook County Jail with a unique idea. The Neediest Kids Fund had given us a grant to provide gifts for children visiting their mothers at the jail during the Christmas season.

We asked if we could give mothers confined in her division the opportunity to choose new books for their children and to let us record those mothers reading the stories. The children would then receive these very special gifts of new books and their mothers' voices. Supt. Benn immediately grasped the possibilities of this venture: connecting those mothers with their children using books. She provided us with the information we needed and guided us through the process. With her help, it worked. Today we are serving people imprisoned in 10 state prisons and 7 county jails.

Supt. Benn passed away last month. She was creative and knew how to make programs work in correctional settings. Her motto was: you can be fair and firm without disrespecting people. She interacted with her staff, the women confined at the jail and we who volunteered there in such a manner. She was a gift to so many.

We are very grateful to her for her role in starting our Aunt Mary's Storybook Project which has become so special to us and to those we serve. May she rest in peace.

journeynotes



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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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Visit us at www.cjtinc.org*



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

Board members: our board is small. We need the help of others.

Groups to hold fund raisers or hold book drives for us: As we grow, our need for additional funds becomes critical. Would you or your group be willing to organize a big or small event, to collect money or new books? Perhaps a shower of books or donations to honor a special person, a bake sale, craft booth, or any other creative idea. We would be grateful.

Postage stamps: Postage stamps are used in Christmas card and Mothers Day projects. We mail about 80 birthday cards per month. Letters are mailed to prisoners hungry to hear from someone in the ,world outside the fences that confine them.

People to help with computer projects: We are constantly in need of people to prepare packages for Aunt Mary's Storybook, and keep records. If you have computer skills, please call or email.

Prayers: Your prayer support is valuable!