

Dear Friends,

Recently I had the opportunity to talk with one of our Aunt Mary's Storybook volunteers. Mary Ellen Lesniak has been working with incarcerated parents for more than seven years, four of these in the medium and high security men's division at Cook County Jail. For Mary Ellen, it's simply "the right thing to do."

Like our volunteers do at 16 facilities around the state, Mary Ellen helps incarcerated parents pick out appropriate books to read to their children. She then records the parent reading the book, a time she calls "sacred." Her volunteering in the men's division has been eye-opening.

"I was amazed at how much these dads and granddads knew about their children's desires. They pick out the books very carefully."

She recalls a recent experience working with a dad who had selected a novel to read to his 13-year-old daughter. In his recorded message, the dad suggests that his daughter reads the book, she mail it back to him so he could also read it and discuss during their phone conversation.

"I was so moved by the love and longing in the message to his daughter," recalls Mary Ellen.

Multiply this heartfelt moment between a daughter and father by hundreds of such moments occurring in correctional facilities from the Cook County Jail in Chicago to the Menard Correctional Center in Chester.

Your generosity makes this happen every day for mothers and fathers, granddads, and grandmothers around the state. **As you gather with your loved ones this holiday season, please remember there are families who will not be together.**

But through your gifts to Companions, children will hear their mom's or dad's voice reading a bedtime story, or singing the ABCs, or reading a chapter from a super marvel hero. You, our wonderful supporters, make this miracle possible.

Thank you again for making a difference in the lives of children and their parents who love them. Please note that for your convenience, you can make a gift online at www.cjtinc.org, or use the enclosed envelope.

Your kindness during this holiday season will strengthen families all year long.

Gratefully,

Marcy Darin
Board Chairperson

Kindred Spirits Fundraiser Results

In August, we held a truly wonderful fund raiser at the Irish Times Pub in Brookfield, IL for our Aunt Mary's Storybook project which serves the children of prisoners. Great food, wonderful sharing and conversation, and an extensive silent auction made the event fun. And we raised \$6,113.62, about \$1,500 more than last year's event.

Thanks to Libby and Angelina who did the majority of planning, our sponsors: Grand Appliances, Barco Products, two anonymous donors, everyone all who recruited and donated silent auction items. We also would like to thank our two jazz musicians, Harry and Jerry, who provided great music, as well as all who attended and those who contributed in any way.

During the event we honored our Volunteer of the Year and a Facility of the year. This year, Ashley received our Volunteer of the Year award. Ashley started with us in April 2017 as a Storybook mailing volunteer, then as a Storybook volunteer inside the Cook County Jail, and now leads our Cook County Jail session in Division 5, the women's division. Our Facility of the Year Award went to Centralia Correctional Center and Counselor S. Walker who do a great job in making sure the Aunt Mary's Storybook project operates smoothly in the facility. Specifically, Counselor Walker goes above and beyond by helping the participants choose great books for their children, and encourages the participants to record a great reading for their children.



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NEEDS

- ◆ Board members
- ◆ Postage stamps
- ◆ Tyvek / bubble envelopes
- ◆ New books / funding
- ◆ Opportunities to speak
- ◆ Prayers

CARDS & WRAPPING

Christmas Cards! Christmas Cards! Christmas Cards!

By the time you read this many thousand Christmas cards will have been delivered or mailed to thousands of prisoners in our state prisons and a few county jails – adult and juvenile. Hundreds of people signed cards with caring messages, provided unsigned cards and lots of postage stamps, and helped prepare these cards for delivery. Each card reminds a person who is incarcerated that there are people who care and that they are remembered this Christmas season.

This year one of our pen pal groups signed cards for each person imprisoned at Centralia Correctional Center – 1,300 in all. Four churches had preparation events: two Catholic, a Presbyterian, and a United Methodist Church in Glen Ellyn, Naperville, and Woodridge.



Gift Wrapping Continues in Springfield

Our gift wrapping fund raiser at the Chicago Ridge Mall was such a gift to us. We raised a lot of money over several years creating festive packages to be put under the Christmas trees of the shoppers. Two years ago it was clear we did have the volunteers to continue this fund raiser at that mall.

However, Jenny and Donna, our two planning volunteers, were able to do a few days wrapping at the Springfield Mall in 2018. They have contracted with the Springfield Mall to offer a gift wrapping service in exchange for donations for our Aunt Mary's Storybook Project on Dec. 16-20th, the 23rd and 24th 2019. If you are anywhere near the Springfield Mall during those days, they would welcome your help and/or you could have your gifts wrapped for a donation. We are so grateful to these two women.



THE PUBLIC & CONNECT WITH KIDS

I don't think the public knows (Written by: Tyrone)

I don't think the public knows of the levels of inhumanity that prisoners must endure while being incarcerated in a maximum security prison. For example, when society says, "if you can't do the time don't do the crime." Is society saying it's acceptable for you to be served food in unsanitary trays that can lead to food poisoning? Is society saying it's acceptable for you to be confined in a cell with no running water for you to use to wash up or flush the toilet? Is society saying that it's acceptable for you to live in a building with mold growth everywhere that causes cancer?

Losing your freedom for being convicted of a crime (whether you did the crime or not) does not mean you're supposed to lost your humanity. Society must know inhumane treatment of prisoners is a reflection of the society and not punishment for crimes.

"Incarcerated connect with their kids through stories"

In September, a reporter from the Cook County Chronicle spent a day observing Aunt Mary's Storybook in action at the Kane County jail. The reporter interviewed volunteers, CJT Executive Director Scott McWilliams, and dads recording books for their daughters and sons. The result is a moving account of the program, full of quotes from CJT founder Jana Minor and incarcerated dads who participate at Kane County Jail.

"I appreciate volunteers coming here and doing this," Quinton Robinson told Chronicle reporter Kevin Beese. "The Companions volunteers wake us up. We are not all bad people. We made bad decisions. The volunteers do proactive things for us. They work magic."

Bennie Ross chose a book about Barack Obama to read to his eight-year-old daughter, who is big fan of the 44th President.

"I love you so much, Baby," Ross said into the recorder held by volunteer Neil R.

"People in prison can't buy their children a toy or a book from Amazon," McWilliams said. "The project gives them hope."

The article, "Incarcerated connect with their kids through stories," was published in the Cook County Chronicle on September 19.

To read the entire article, please visit cjinc.org, or <https://chronicleillinois.com/news/cook-county-news/incarcerated-connect-with-their-kids-through-stories/>

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

- **Board members:** We have a dedicated group of board members, but could use more. Would you consider joining us?
- **New Books / Funding:** As we grow, our need for funds becomes critical. Would you, your family, or your group organize a big or small event, to collect money or new books?
- **Invitations to speak:** At your church or organization gathering.
- **Postage stamps:** For Christmas cards 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.
- **Tyvek / bubble envelopes:** (9x12, 10x13, 12.5x15.5)
- **People to help with computer projects:** We are constantly in need of people to prepare packages for Aunt Mary's Storybook, and keep records.
- **Prayers:** Your prayer support is valuable!