Every November we send out an appeal letter, inviting people to continue to support the mission to keep good books accessible to incarcerated people in Illinois. We were prepared, however, for the effects of COVID19 on everyone’s lives. So when the results were tallied this spring, you could have blown us over with a feather. Together we raised $15,055—the largest amount our November appeal letter has ever brought in. (continued on page 4)

A RECORD BREAKING RESPONSE!
Rachel Rasmussen

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BOOKS: INSPIRATION AND FUEL FOR CHANGE
James Winston, Volunteer

I still remember my lottery number: 134. It was low, a guarantee that I would be drafted. I was never interested in leaving Champaign-Urbana to see the world. Nevertheless, at the age of 22, I found myself homesick and lonely, fighting a war in Vietnam. Some big city boys assured me that there was something to ease my pain, and indeed it did. I returned from Vietnam addicted to heroin. It took many years to change that; many setbacks, including five sentences to prison. I never could figure out how to really change. In 2006, having broken some rule, I was placed in “the hole” with a Bible to keep me company. So, I read it, I read it every day. The Bible poured faith into me. Faith helped me change. I could no longer live only for myself. I volunteer at Books to Prisoners because I know first-hand that a book can provide the inspiration and fuel for change. Prison time does not have to be lost time. It can provide a time of reflection, of figuring out who you are and who you want (continued on page 4)
FIRST VIRTUAL AUCTION & RAFFLE FUNDRAISER
by Anna H. and Rachel S. (Volunteers)

This February, UC Books to Prisoners held its first ever virtual auction and raffle! Since the pandemic cancelled three of our regular fundraiser book sales we needed to keep the books available to prisoners. So we formed a small task force, and hatched the idea of an online auction. We reached out to the community to donate items to auction and raffle, but we never expected the level of support we received.

We are incredibly grateful for all of the help, especially with the challenges COVID 19 was creating for everyone. Several local businesses and creators donated items for the event: art coop inc., Enchantment Alley, Glow by Lola, Human Kinetics, Kiri Made, Plant Mode, Red Herring Vegetarian Restaurant, The Upper Bout, and Zainab Susi.

Many of these organizations are new partners for us, and we reached many new donors because of them. Though it was a lot of work, the auction and raffle were a success thanks to their generosity; it raised needed funds and increased community awareness around the work Books to Prisoners does.

The funds raised will contribute to shipping costs to over 25 Illinois prisons and toward improving the book collections in the lending libraries we run in both county jails.

Thank you to all who organized this event, donated, bid or purchased raffle tickets! And stay tuned—we may try this again next year!

GIFTS OF ART AND HAND MADE GREETING CARDS FROM INCARCERATED READERS

Artists L to R: JC, Francis O’Campos, Anonymous, Leo Cardez.

“DEAR BOOKS TO PRISONERS . . .”

I greatly appreciate the last set of books sent. The guys and I that share books had a lot of fun dialoguing and sharing insights for weeks at a time. I am writing you requesting more books to read. Enclosed are 6 authors/subjects we would like to discuss. If you have anything related to these topics I thank you sincerely if you would send them. I look forward to hearing from you.

Authors
Jean Trotsky
Sir Francis Bacon
Sweeter Truth
Lao Tzu
Confucius
Kwame Nkrumah

Subjects
Sumerian Civilization
Egyptian Civilization
Vegan Protein Sources
Spiritual practice
Vedas
Shetout Neter
SO WHAT SPARKS ACTION? THE ANSWER IS YOU NEVER KNOW
Liz Abraham and Rachel Rasmussen

Sometimes it feels like no one understands but you, no one else cares. What inspires hope, then?

This spring three carloads of donated books showed up at our door. They had come from a church congregation 138 miles away. The organizer of the St. James Episcopal book drive was a mom. She learned about B2P from her incarcerated son who had received books from us. She was touched that someone else cared. She told her congregation. So, on that sunny May morning, caring people drove from West Dundee to deliver the books a mom’s congregation collected so that many other peoples’ sons (and daughters) had books.

So, sometimes people know and care. Other times, you tell; you ask; you hope. At a COVID-safe version of our annual Martin Luther King Day of Service we held a curbside drop-off for book donations relating to MLK’s legacy. For those who couldn’t drop off books, we had an MLK Day Amazon Wish list. This drive was a huge success both in itself but also in the way it spawned more drives: The Urbana-Champaign Friends Meeting, First Mennonite Church, the Mutual Aid Working Group of the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) of UIUC, and the Champaign Rotary and Sunshine Rotary clubs, all organized book drives for B2P. Meanwhile members of our local Central Illinois Mosque & Islamic Center keep us stocked with Qurans year round.

Sometimes you don’t tell or ask, but people act anyway. The local Unitarian Universalist (UU) church helped us to publicize a UU prisoner pen-pal program, Worthy Now*. They helped hand out leaflets to book donors at the MLK Day drive by. This service work alerted the youth program to B2P’s mission and need. That group not only passed along information about Worthy Now, but organized a larger book drive among the UU churches across the central region of Illinois, to see that incarcerated people received books.

It seems that caring, that doing good is contagious. And it feels good. Very good. With so many books to choose from, we are better equipped to provide incarcerated people with the kinds of books they request to support them in their own goals and needs. You never know what sparks action; but we are very grateful when it happens.

I was recently introduced to Yarran, generally a book giver who filled my soul with gratitude being there. He was one who is concerned about one of our people who are incarcerated and one of the people who is working to assist us in our development and education. Thank you!

In the hierarchy of the GED prep pack, I am requesting the GED prep book. I am writing book on how to write a biography. I need to read, a Glade’s Law Dictionary to interpret legal terms.

I love getting books from yall. I don’t have no family or friends on the outside. Yall are the only ones that I write to. God bless you all for your program without if I would not have anything at all. 

* https://worthynow.org
to be. With many of life's distractions gone, prison can provide opportunity to grow. Prison teaches you to persevere, but you may persevere going in the wrong direction. A book can provide the chance of finding the right direction. That is what happened to me. The Bible was the book for me.

Today prisons provide educational programming for only a small percentage of those incarcerated. You can spend a year in prison without ever moving up the waiting list to attend GED classes. That is so wrong. And dangerous for our community. People leave prison no better educated than when they entered. Like fruit left on the vine, wasting away. Many incarcerated spend their time in their cells, with no plan for the future. No catalyst for change. I volunteer at Books to Prisoners because sending books to incarcerated people may provide an opportunity for self-improvement; for reading the book that finally makes things click. The Bible tells me that those in prison are my neighbors and I must care for my neighbors. I see prisoners in our country as in need, and at 72 years of age, I am weary. Then, I remind myself, as I remind you: you can never grow weary of doing good.

(A Record Breaking Response! - continued from page 1)

By itself this campaign made up for the funding loss from having to cancel three benefit book sales. The amazement grows when we consider it happened in 2020 of all years. We hardly know how to acknowledge this outpouring on behalf of those who have suffered the most neglect during COVID. These funds put us in the position to redouble our efforts to get hold of the best books we can, to provide to as many prisoners as we can, as quickly as we can. Thank you for encouraging so many people who survived COVID in our prisons, by making sure the books flow, and with the books, the message that they are not forgotten. As one prisoner wrote us, “we are extremely thankful for people like you. It means a lot to be cared for at all, let alone by strangers. Thank you.”