URBANA-CHAMPAIGN BOOKS TO PRISONERS
A working group of the Urbana Champaign Independent Media Center

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Reading with Feeling
Thank You for the Hope You Give
Rachel Rasmussen, Program Coordinator
The mission of UC Books to Prisoners (B2P) is to provide books free of charge to people incarcerated in Illinois and to educate ourselves and our community about incarceration and prisons. Why? We do it because many of the books that incarcerated people want to read are not accessible to them. Literacy improves the more you read, and we all tend to read more when we can read what we want to read. So, prisoners write to us requesting books they want to read. And among the thousands of books donated to us every year, we will look hard to find those books or a close-enough substitute. Some of us will choose to just go buy them.

Reading the letters is educational. Most people are surprised to learn that the most frequently requested book by prisoners is a dictionary. It’s why we intentionally welcome volunteers from all walks of life. The more people see how valid these book requests are for a positive, constructive use of time, the more restricting access to books is questioned. It seems to work against a successful re-entry into society. Society pays a great deal to incarcerate all the people it does. All expenses considered, books are cheap, and education has been proven to reduce recidivism.

Last winter B2P received an extremely generous donation from a freshly graduated student volunteer. It will significantly increase our mission capacity. The donor, who asked to be anonymous has given permission for us to share an excerpt of her letter (page 5).

The letter gives passionate voice to the impact that reading many, many prisoners’ requests for books has on volunteers. With no less passion a prisoner’s letter (page 3) tells how our work restores their capacity to feel human. Very frequently prisoners find it a miracle that there is this organization that is set up to do nothing but locate the books they want/read and that sends them for free. Just for the asking.

Thank you to everyone who is part of this miracle. B2P is deeply grateful for every donation, large or small, whether in time, talent, books, money or encouragement. May it beget more miracles.

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When you purchase books from www.bookshop.org/shop/uchookbookstoprisoners you can be sure
  ✓ they are highly requested by prisoners and
  ✓ 50% of profits will be donated to UC-B2P and
  ✓ you’ll be supporting an independent bookstore.

Dear Books to Prisoners . . .

Excerpt from the Donor/Volunteer’s Letter

When you've been in prison your whole life . . .

Dear Books to Prisoners,

Please accept our donation of $13,500. . .

I don’t find it an exaggeration to say that my life revolves around reading. I was raised in libraries and have always found comfort and joy within books and the literary communities at large. It is nearly unimaginable to me that members of our society do not have free access to books and written materials and even more unfathomable is the fact that there are those in positions of authority who intentionally withhold such resources from specific groups and individuals.

I learned about B2P during my first few weeks . . . at the University of Illinois. I have been volunteering with Books to Prisoners for some time now and have witnessed first-hand the impact this organization has on the lives of incarcerated individuals. The prison-industrial complex exemplifies informational gatekeeping at its worst and any efforts to push through, and ultimately remove such barriers is as noble a cause as any in my book.

Hill Correctional Center’s Leisure Time Services (LTS) Department initiated a book club for its Individuals in Custody in November 2021. The program was offered to all individuals but limited to only 10 members due to COVID restrictions. Once those restrictions are lifted, we anticipate a large growth in our membership.

Our members meet twice a month and are led by two fellow peers. These meetings enable our members to discuss literature from a wide array of genres. This allows for a deeper understanding of the provided reading materials and encourages members to converse about different perceptions of what they read and understand. Members are encouraged to suggest different books and/or genres that they are interested in reading.

Programs such as the LTS Book Club, provide a sense of empowerment for our Individuals in Custody. Our book club allows for Individuals to not only have additional access to books, but also provides the opportunity to have constructive conversation with their fellow peers. I intentionally selected a diverse group of Individuals to ensure there would be varied perspectives and opinions about the reading material. Having personally sat in on the meetings, I have observed all our members participating in discussion and even exuding confidence when doing so. Book club meetings are efficient but also light-hearted and I can tell the members genuinely enjoy the time together.

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