

URBANA CHAMPAIGN BOOKS TO PRISONERS

NOVEMBER 2020 | A WORKING GROUP OF THE INDEPENDENT MEDIA CENTER | P.O. BOX 515, URBANA, IL 61803 | WWW.BOOKS2PRISONERS.ORG

Something New . . . Introducing the UC Books to Prisoners newsletter!

Greetings friends of UC Books to Prisoners! Enthusiasm for our mission paired with deep appreciation for your support made this newsletter happen. Whether you've supported us by shopping our book sales, donating used books or giving financially, our service to incarcerated people wouldn't be possible without your support. We're planning to make this newsletter a regular means of keeping you informed about what you are supporting when you donate to Books to Prisoners (B2P). As you read the good stories, moving letters, impressive statistics, and provocative art produced in prison cells, we hope you will consider a gift to keep this happening. Books changes lives.

PERSISTING IN THE AGE OF COVID

WE ARE ANSWERING LETTERS AGAIN

With a skeleton crew of retiree volunteers and very small public sessions limited to 3 people, we're back in business. For more information on how to volunteer, call 708-782-4608.

OUR JAIL LIBRARIES

Although the libraries were closed to the volunteers in March, our patrons in the jail had uninterrupted access to our collection. Our volunteers resumed staffing at the end of June, with some COVID related restrictions.

TWO CANCELLED BOOK SALES

Resulting in a funding loss of around \$10,000 we are exploring alternative safe means of raising funds.

WE'RE READY FOR BOOKS AGAIN!

After closing our book collection bins for 7 months during the pandemic, we are in need books. Our bins are open: please see our WISH LIST on the back page.

VOLUNTEER ENTHUSIASM IS HIGH

An October Community Dictionary Drive was organized by Kate Shanks, UIUC undergrad frustrated by our closure. The drive collected over 130 of these most requested books by incarcerated people.

NEW COLLABORATION

Unity in Action magazine; an online publication whose concern for communities harmed most by the mechanisms of mass incarceration overlaps with B2P's mission has agreed to publish the prisoner art, poetry and short stories that come to us along with requests for books. More on this story to come in future newsletters.



Above, in the newly re-modeled packing room, volunteers Carol Emmerling, Ann Lowry, Susan Hill and Carol Ellis work fast to pack up all remaining orders of books before the pandemic closed us down. Right, Bonnie Swenson prepares to move another pile of boxes up the stairs to the post office.

RACING TO PACK 400 BOOK ORDERS IN A DAY

Nick Goodell (reprinted with permission from *The Public i* (March 2020), a publication of the IMC.

On Monday March 16, with the number of COVID-19 cases in the United States beginning to skyrocket, many who were able were already taking steps to work remotely and shelter in place. But down in the basement of the Independent Media Center, eight volunteers from Urbana-Champaign Books to Prisoners (B2P) were hard at work.

Aware that the pandemic would soon mean that they must close their doors, members of B2P had decided to have one last volunteer day to try and get as much work done as possible before then. So, for about eight hours that Monday, B2P volunteers worked to fulfill as many book requests, answer as many letters, and ship as many books as they could.

To Ann Lowry, B2P volunteer, this level of work was business as usual. "We were 'dedicated,' but not especially 'brave,'" she explained in an email. Though the IMC basement was heavily trafficked, she knew that it would be unsafe for B2P volunteers to be coming and going more than they had to. "That's why I worked to conceive of the process that allowed us to get all of the books shipped accurately to all of the prisoners, even those who had been transferred. I hoped we could do it in one day, and we achieved that goal."

In that single, eight-hour day, B2P shipped about 400 orders, or an estimated 1,200-1,500 individual books. The postage costs were over \$1,000 which Ann told me was B2P's normal postage budget for about two months. B2P delivered so many packages to the Urbana Post Office on the main floor of the Independent Media Center that they couldn't all be held for delivery. Some B2P volunteers therefore came back on the next day, March 17, to finish the job.

To volunteers like Ann, the Mega-Packing Day was a little like the Dolly Parton song, "9 to 5," except that Dolly Parton "was referring to young female office workers, rather than older women filling and hauling book boxes while standing on a concrete floor for an entire day." Priscilla Christians, another volunteer, wrote in an email that "we all had a sense (*continued on back page*)

A LIFE WITHOUT BOOKS Liz Abraham



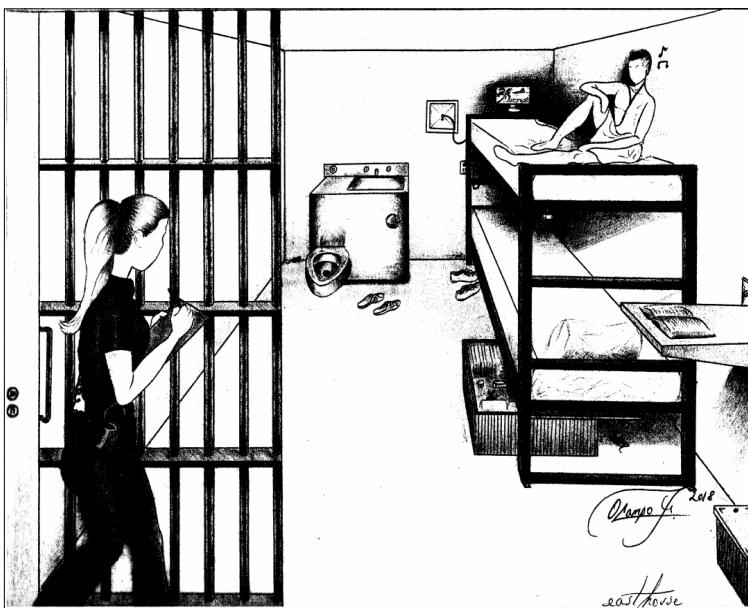
My initial motivation to volunteer with Books to Prisoners was quite simple: I couldn't imagine life without books. I especially couldn't imagine being imprisoned and not having access to books. From the time I learned to read, books have been my source for discovering how people and the world operate, as well as a means of escape. From learning about friendship with Wil-

bur and Charlotte, the dangers of Fascism from farm animals, the importance of family from Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy or the quality of mercy from Shylock, books have been my education and my joy. These days nothing can compare with an insightful poem from Billy Collins or the poetic prose of James Baldwin. Books taught me that tears can be very, very good. We weep when Charlotte dies but see that we will go on. Later I added anger to my motivation. Incarcerating people with no intention of rehabilitation made me really mad. And what cheaper and more effective rehabilitation is there than books?

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Books have recently taught me that mass incarceration was strategic, a continuation of a system that privileges some at the expense of others. I want to give incarcerated people the opportunity to discover how humans and the world operate, to learn how to go on when challenges are insurmountable. I want them to have the opportunity of escape, of learning the importance of family, the warmth of friendship, and the joy of a poetry.

Liz Abraham has served Books to Prisoners over 12 years, volunteering in the lending libraries we operate at the two county jails, and she's an active member of the Champaign chapter of Reading Reduces Recidivism (3Rs) which works with prison librarians.



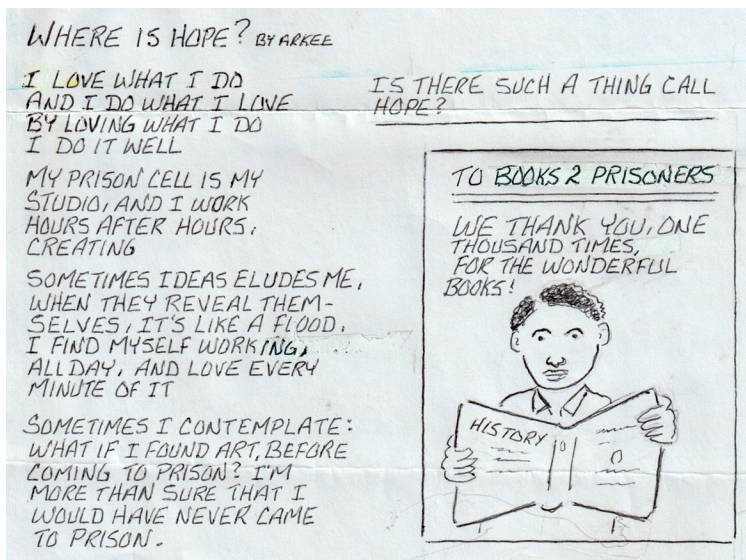
WE CONSTANTLY RECEIVE GIFTS OF ART and hand-made cards among the letters prisoners send to us for books. Through poetry, short stories and art we learn from their perspectives, humor, insights and considerable skills. For years one of those artists has been Arkee Cheney (cartoon below and on facing page). He has since been released after 34 years. Please visit his website to be inspired and to purchase his art: www.arkeestudios.com. Francisco Ocampo is another artist who helps give us insight into life in prison through his sketches (below left).



Hello, I've been writing you guys since I first came to prison when I was 19. Now here I am almost 10 years later still writing you. I just wanted to say thank you and express how much what you guys do actually helps and how much it has helped me personally. When your sitting all by yourself in your cell with nothing, probably thinking about sad, depressing events in your life than all of a sudden somebody shows up and gives you a handful of books... I can't even begin to describe the amount of joy that brings me... Thank you for all that you do.

This letter is written by another person who will remain anonymous.

THE MISSION OF URBANA-CHAMPAIGN BOOKS
TO PRISONERS IS TO PROVIDE FREE BOOKS
TO PEOPLE INCARCERATED IN ILLINOIS AND
TO PROMOTE EDUCATION ABOUT
INCARCERATION AND PRISONS.



THANK YOU FOR HELPING ME MAKE AN IMPACT

Sanha Kim, class of 2020

I remember that the first public session I went to was an attempt to distract my mind from an impending calculus exam. After that first session however, the mission of Books to Prisoners resonated with me more than anything else I had encountered on campus. In that short period of time, the task at hand was more than just completing a wish-list of books but to offer access to information for a demographic often dismissed by society. That one night revealed to me that I should not be blind to the educational restriction of prisoners while I have the privilege of attending college. Since then I collected/carried books, filled out letters, and organized student involvement in Books to Prisoners.



While the labor was at times tedious, I never regretted my time being there with others who shared my beliefs and dedication. Comparing the organization's activity from the time I first started to now, I can see that our mission resonates strongly with the community as more and more student volunteers have expanded B2P's options. I wish I can witness the next stages of innovation and progress for the organization and I hope that the crisis we are in now does not inhibit the work you all have invested.

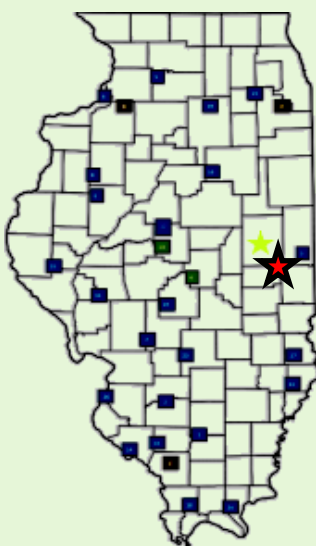
As I move on to my next journey, I will be searching for similar missions in the Charlottesville area and continue to express the values I have learned from you all. Thank you for helping me make an impact in B2P and mobilizing the student community for this cause.

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Sanha, right, at our information table at the huge UIUC student club fair in fall of 2019. Sanha helped launch the B2P UI Student Club, serving as its treasurer, helping organize fundraisers. He graduated in 2020 and is enrolled in the Ph.D. program at the University of Virginia.

Map of IL Prisons

Star is our location in Urbana



UC Books to Prisoners by the NUMBERS (since June 1st)

1500+

Volunteer
Hours



4700+

Books packed
& sent



\$3800+

Shipping
Costs



250+

Dictionaries sent



1400+

Incarcerated
People Served



WISHLIST: TITLES & TOPICS

Paperback is always preferred.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

AFRICAN HISTORY, CIVILIZATIONS, RELIGION

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X

NOVELISTS: CASSANDRA CLARE, ASHLEY SNELL & JAQUAVIS COLEMAN, KIKI SWINSON, ZANE, K'WAN, NIKKI TURNER, BRANDON SANDERSON, TAD WILLIAMS, ROBIN HOBB, DAVID EDDINGS, GLEN COOK, ALEXANDER DREYMON, STEPHEN KING, JAMES PATTERSON, DEAN KOOUNTZ
paperback only for these novelists, please.

BOOKS IN SPANISH—FICTION, NON-FICTION, ESPECIALLY SELF-HELP

CAR ENGINES & REPAIR

COMPLETE SETS OF SCIENCE FICTION SERIES; STAND-ALONE FANTASY NOVELS;

ENGLISH DICTIONARIES—NEVER CAN HAVE TOO MANY!

FINANCIAL LITERACY, MONEY MANAGEMENT, INVESTING

G.E.D. STUDY HELP IN ALL SUBJECTS

GRIT: HOW TO GET A JOB AND BUILD A CAREER WITH A CRIMINAL RECORD (BLAKEMAN)

HOW TO DRAW —BEGINNER AND ADVANCED TECHNIQUE (NO PICTURES OF NUDES)
HOW TO PAINT—WITH OILS, WITH ACRYLIC, WITH WATERCOLOR

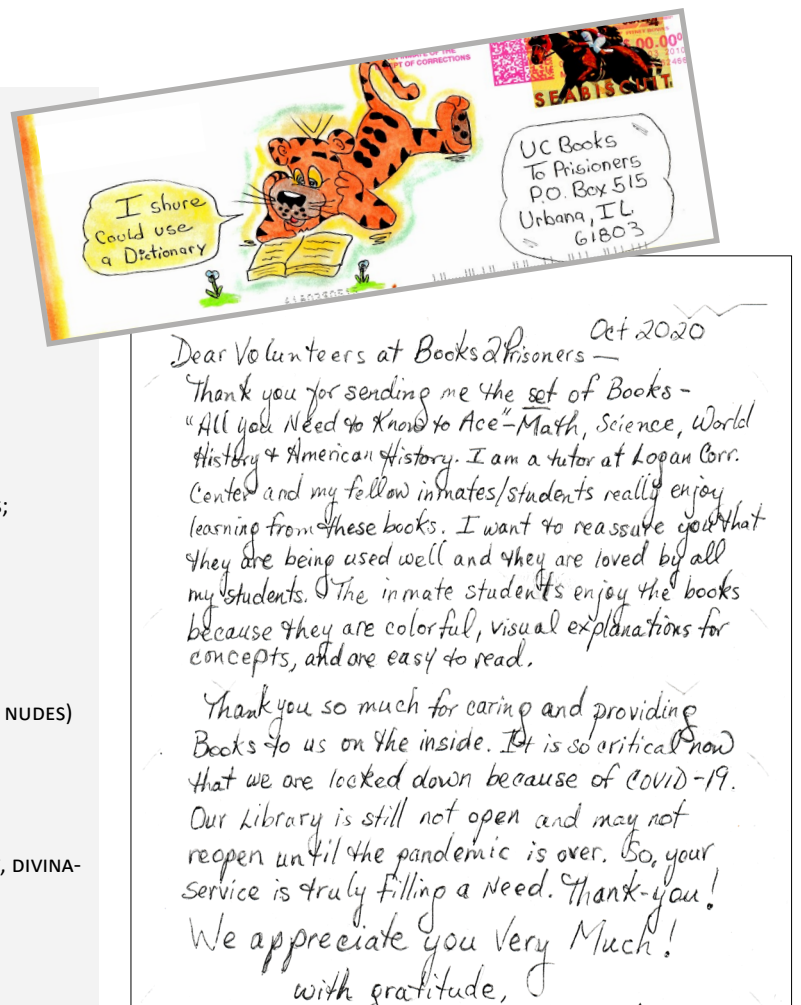
HOW TO START / RUN A BUSINESS OR NON-PROFIT

MYTHS AND MYTHOLOGY

PARANORMAL/OCCULT TOPICS (MONSTERS, GHOSTS, ALCHEMY, ASTROLOGY, DIVINATION, UFOs)

THE QU'RAN

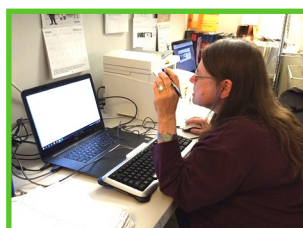
SELF-HELP (ADDICTION RECOVERY, PTSD, HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS, ETC.)



(continued from page 1) of purpose and knew our time was limited before the lockdown." UC Books to Prisoners' service to both Illinois prisons and the Champaign County Jails has since re-opened operations after being down for March, April and most of May—a move that gives Christians and her colleagues much relief: more than ever, the pandemic has increased need for reading and study material of prisoners. Volunteers are glad to be back in operation, even if in a smaller capacity, taking all COVID precautions seriously. While B2P feels different without the usual numbers of volunteers that fill its workroom and without the community support at its book sales, it continues to find ways to contribute toward the healing of



Above clockwise, Priscilla Christians, 12-year volunteer at the marathon packing event. UIUC students and members of the public who helped put on our fall 2019 book sale. Susan Hill, 10 year volunteer, manages shipping expenses on the big packing day. Volunteers at our 2020 Martin Luther King Day or Service which drew over 50 volunteers, members of the UI Muslim Student Association writing notes to prisoners to accompany the books being sent. The art received from a prisoner years and years ago still hangs on our wall and means a lot to us.



Newsletter Team: Liz Abraham, Adithya Kuchibhotla, Emilie Schramer.
Rachel Rasmussen, UC Books to Prisoners Volunteer Coordinator.