

Providing free books to incarcerated people in Illinois

The mission of U-C Books to Prisoners is to provide free books to people incarcerated in Illinois and to promote education about incarceration and prisons.

BOOK SALE SUCCESS MEANS BETTER BOOKS FOR PRISONERS

Rachel Rasmussen

HIGHLIGHTS

- This issue of our newsletter features our **County Jail Library Program**, another service B2P provides. The year-long COVID-caused closure to public volunteers is coming to an end in 2022.
- **Grant to buy books for the jails** in honor of long term volunteer jail librarian.
- Champaign County Sheriff's Office matches the grant
- **Biggest book sale ever** translates to better selection of books for prisoners
- **April 2022 the Common Ground Round Up 4 Good grant** will be awarded to B2P
- Purchasing the Kaplan **GED test prep book** in bulk is a reality
- A **Wishlist** for the holidays: books we never have enough of
- **Hope College (MI)** students' drive 700 books from Michigan
- **Lots of thanks** from incarcerated readers



L to R: Hannah Jones, Nicole Liang, Hanna Foster and Cheyenne Puetz, grad students at UIUC set out and organize the sale books.

It took six long days of hard work by over 120 volunteers, but on October 16 and 17 U-C Books to Prisoners (B2P) successfully pulled off the largest sale in its history. The inventory of sale books was outgrowing all storage space, since COVID cancelled the usual schedule of two sales per year. Close to three times the usual inventory was set out for this sale that grossed over (con't. on p. 4)

*Greetings,
First of all, I want to thank you for helping people that are in prison. It means a lot to me. Most people just want to throw us away. Your work is making a difference in people's lives.*

GRANT TO HONOR JAIL LIBRARIAN JANET GAYE WONG

Liz Abraham

When Books to Prisoners heard that a long-time volunteer jail librarian was seriously injured when she fell from her horse, and then the horse fell on her, fellow volunteers wanted to do something. With family and friends stepping up to provide care and companionship, it took a while to find the right something to do. Then someone thought about applying to Random Acts Incorporated for funds to replenish the jail library shelves, significantly thinned



Gaye at home, November 2021.

during the pandemic. When the amount of \$499 was awarded to us, it was quickly agreed to use the funds in tribute to Janet Gaye Wong.

Fortunately, Gaye is on the mend (multiple broken ribs, punctured lung, crushed hip, to name of few of her challenges) and is pleased that books for the jails will be purchased with the grant money. Gaye explains that she was taught to read by her dad, when she was three. Since that time, books have been a major source of joy for her. She imagines that most (con't. on p. 4)

“What you do is more of what this world needs”

-prisoner letter

We know books change lives because they have changed ours.

Please help us continue to make books available to those who want the opportunity to read.

You may donate using the remittance envelope provided in this newsletter
OR online at www.books2prisoners.org

GIFTS FROM HOPE

Kathleen Kluegel

In September, Hannah Santiago and Marvellous Agudoro (below, right), two students who are leaders of the Community Healing Fund at Hope College, drove all the way from Holland, Michigan, to Urbana to donate to Books to Prisoners! They chose U-C Books to Prisoners as the recipient of their organization's book drive this fall. They looked at our website to identify the kinds of books that B2P needs and focused on those topics in their collection efforts. The Hope College students started with a goal of gathering and donating 250 books from their fellow students. They surpassed that goal with ease, finishing with over 700 books! With the help of other B2P volunteers that afternoon, the books were carried to the workroom and put on shelves, tables, and book trucks. As the boxes came in, our volunteers were amazed by the quality and the quantity of these donations. A volunteer took the visitors to lunch, and they enjoyed learning more details about the Books to Prisoners program. Everyone ended the day tired and satisfied. ♦



B2P volunteers work with kindred spirits from Hope College, Michigan, and unpack the many bags and boxes of books collected for prisoners.

First thing first I have
an hard time reading & I was wondering do you
guys have any reading material that breaks
things down in a better reading form that I
can understand I also need an GED book
for I can prepare myself for an more righteous
road. Not just for me but my kids as well.
Can you please also send me an Theasarus,
Excuse my Spelling and I really appreciate you
for your time & help. (Thank you once again)

GED PREP BOOKS CHANGE LIVES

Ann Lowry

For many years we could not fill requests for GED (General Educational Development) books. They were almost never donated, and B2P's budget could not meet a need for new editions. Finally, in Spring 2020, a former B2P volunteer made an unprecedented donation: \$800 worth of GED Prep books (50 copies), purchased in bulk. By Thanksgiving 2020 these had all been shipped. Another individual donor stepped up, purchasing \$400 worth (25 copies) - followed by 25 copies from a local civic organization. By Thanksgiving 2021 B2P will have shipped its 100th copy of a volume that contains 800 pages of educational content, including 2 sample tests. Word of availability is spreading at many prisons, as we can tell from specific mentions in recent request letters.

Books Change Lives. GED Prep books can enhance the knowledge, self-esteem, and character of prisoners while they're still incarcerated, and they can lead to employment opportunities "on the outside." Thanks to your outpouring of support we'll be ordering the 2022 version soon. We don't expect the need will go away soon, so we feel encouraged about this new opportunity for so many. ♦

COUNTY JAIL LIBRARIES PROVIDE A LITERACY OPPORTUNITY THAT IS UNIQUE

Liz Abraham

Urbana-Champaign Books to Prisoners operates lending libraries at both Champaign County jails, in addition to mailing books to men and women in Illinois prisons. B2P provides donated books and magazines as well as four to six volunteers weekly to staff the library sessions. Volunteers organize books, repair them, and add to the collections on a weekly basis. Most county jails in Illinois do not have libraries and none to the extent Champaign County does. We are special in the programming provided, much by volunteers.

Celeste Blodgett, the Coordinator of Programs for the jails, says, "we are extremely fortunate to have libraries in

both jail locations, as well as dedicated librarians with passion for reading and compassion for those detained here. The pandemic has greatly affected many processes in the jail, including the ability to offer programming. While a limited version of Library has continued during this time of restricted function, we very much look forward to fully resuming programs as soon as Champaign-Urbana Public Health District determines it is safe to do so."

B2P Jail librarians are scheduling regular clean ups at the two libraries and are recruiting new librarians in anticipation of reopening and providing full service in the jails in

2022. Their excitement to return to this project was increased when B2P learned that the Champaign County Sheriff's Office will match the grant, allowing even more books to replenish dwindling supplies in both jails.

What is it like to volunteer as a jail librarian? First, you don't have to be a librarian, just willing to assist people in finding something to read. Tim Livingston (a regular at the satellite jail until he moved to Madison in 2019) agreed to share a reflection on his experience of a Friday morning shift (pre-COVID). While the perceptions and experiences are his, one can get a general sense of what it's like. His story is on page 5.



ON BEHALF OF READERS INCARCERATED IN ILLINOIS, A HOLIDAY WISHLIST!

The following subjects are frequently requested by those in our local jails and state prisons.

If you are perchance looking to donate books, we recommend checking the list below. Please choose paperback when possible; if the book is used, aim for *very good condition*. If it's *non-fiction* and *used*, please consider books published in the last ten years. Our address and contact information is on the back page.

VERY POPULAR NON-FICTION INTERESTS

BUSINESS

– esp. to advice to beginners

MONEY

–financial literacy, getting out of poverty,

TRADES

– house improvement, but also welding, masonry, engine repair, car body work, construction, plumbing, wiring...

CAREERS

–real estate, food truck business, barber/beautician, twisting dread locks, etc.

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

NUTRITION

–basic or general (not marketing a specific diet)

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

–by African American historians, biographies

MENTAL HEALTH,

–intro to psychology, bi-polarism, autism, ADHD, addiction

ENGLISH AS A 2nd LANGUAGE

VERY POPULAR FICTION REQUESTS

MANGA

–esp. complete series; avoid racy covers

LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS

–esp. in Sci-Fi. Fantasy and Mystery genres

SCI-FI/FANTASY FOR ADULTS (cf *youth/young adult*)

–in *complete* series or published in one volume

URBAN FICTION, a.k.a. street lit –avoid racy covers

POPULAR FICTION AUTHORS:

esp. most recent publications

JaQuavis Coleman K'wan Foye

Sister Souljah Sapphire

Teri Woods Bryan Sanderson

Patrick Rothfuss Jim Butcher

Terry Goodkind Joe Abercrombie

R.A. Salvatore Robert Jordan, *Wheel of Time*

Robin Hobb N.K.Jemison, *Dark Earth Trilogy*

THANKS
FOR YOUR
DONATIONS,
YOU'RE THE
BEST!

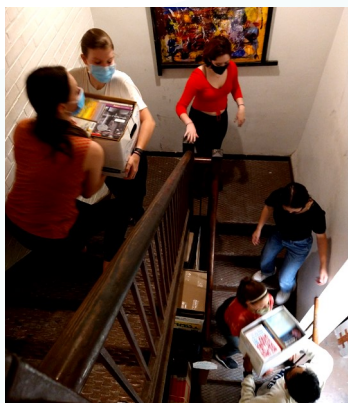
(Wong, con't. from p. 1) people would say that her first love is horses, and she does love horses, but for her, the most important thing is access to good books. When Gaye retired, she wanted to volunteer for something she believed in, and being a Champaign County jail librarian is something she believes in. It fit so perfectly that she has volunteered consistently, often weekly, for over ten years. The idea of providing reading materials to a population with little other access got her started, but the relationships she developed with the readers kept her coming back.

She volunteered primarily at the downtown jail, in a library space she describes as *intimate*. (Many others would say *small*, even *cramped*.) The space limitations encourage interaction. She sees that it matters to the men and women that she listens, and tries to find the right something for them to read. While she still has more recovery ahead, she hopes to be back volunteering once she is able. Gaye is a wonderful example of getting back on the horse when life has thrown you off. Thank you, Gaye, for your service and your example. ♦

Thank you so much for the books you provide to people like myself. It's a great feeling to have something to read in this place. The time I get for myself when I'm immersed in a good book that's new to me is probably the greatest reprieve from the everyday tedium that haunts my life these days.

Hello once again! I just wanted to quickly thank you for the service you provide. I've unfortunately been incarcerated for a time now, yet it has allowed me to appreciate more in life. I see this in others I have given your information to, whom like myself, are comforted by someone/something they know they can depend upon. Thank you!

I want you guys to know we are very grateful here at Vandalia C.C. for your service, time and dedication. There are a few hispanic guys here that we have been teaching how to read english and how to write as well. I guess you can say we are paying it forward with your donations.



(L) Five people along the human chain of 20-some volunteers moving hundreds of boxes from our basement storage to the sale upstairs in two 2-hour shifts. (Center) Community and UIUC student volunteers pose amid some of the boxes they moved; (R) A first: the sale dominated the entire first floor of the IMC.

(Sale, con't from p. 1) grossed \$8,000—a record-breaker. Proceeds from the sale, combined with generosity of donors all year, recent grants from Random Acts (see story on p. 1) and Urbana's Common Ground Food Co-op's Round Up 4 Good award (set for April 2022) has brought B2P to a long-desired capacity to be able to purchase the most frequently requested book subjects (e.g., GED test prep books; also see the Wishlist on p. 3). And this is good news for the incarcerated and their families.

With any luck, B2P will return to regular book sales that are also an enjoyable means for the local community to participate in this deeply rewarding venture to share "the power that a good book wields," as one prisoner wrote.

The event was covered by both WAND and WCIA TV stations, *Smile Politely* and the *News Gazette* and advertised on MTD buses. Look for details the next (smaller) sale this April. ♦

I am doing my best to stay on top of my goals but at times it's really difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The books you have sent me over the years and even this last time have always met my request and help keep me occupied since we have had almost 4 months with no movement.

I cannot thank you enough for the services you provide, I know that it has helped me and I hope it has helped others over the years. I hope that this pandemic hasn't affected you in the way it has us in the institutions.

FRIDAY MORNING

Tim Livingston

The half-dozen men in bright orange jumpsuits approach me at my table. It's a ragtag group that runs the gamut in terms of race, age, and temperament. I try to establish a friendly mood.

"Good morning fellas. How's it going?" One by one, they drop their stacks of books onto the folding table.

"Name please?"

"Charles Monroe."

Rather than hunt for his index card in the filing box, I scribble his name on a scrap of paper. The guys don't have much time. I'll find his card and check in his books once everyone's inside.

"Name please?" It sounds like, "Teshaw Doggenson."

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

I used to mess up the names all the time. They seemed accented or muddled to my ears. It still happens, but I'm way better than I used to be.

Sam and I are working at the front desk. He's a veteran. A lot of times,

he doesn't even ask for names -- he knows them by heart. We finish checking in the returned books while the patrons browse inside the conference room. It's the only room that doesn't have a dedicated purpose. During the week, it's used for AA meetings, GED classes, flu shots, you



Becca Maree, a past volunteer jail librarian waits for patrons to arrive in the Champaign County satellite jail's library room.

name it. But earlier this morning, we hauled out eleven rolling bookshelves. We spread magazines on top of folding tables. We got ready for a typical Friday morning in the library of

the Champaign County Satellite Jail.

Later in the morning, I trade places with Lois. She's the lead volunteer. In fact, she runs the whole library program. She manages the schedule, recruits volunteers, and communicates with the jail staff. She's been doing it for years. Now I'm working the floor -- restocking the shelves and helping the fellas find books they're interested in. It's my favorite part of the job.

A young guy is looking for a book about drawing. He wants to make pictures of animals for his son. I find a couple in the Hobbies section. I also grab a book on origami. "Maybe you could fold animals for him too."

Someone else asks for a book on starting a business. I know right where to go. We get this request a lot. Fellas worry about how they're going to make it, how they'll find jobs with a record. Without a lot of options, they think about starting small businesses, like repairing cars or doing yardwork.

Of course, most guys read for fun -- to escape a little.

A guy asks me, "You got Cartel 7?"

(con't. on p. 6)

BOOK DONORS

TO All the wonderful people who have had the generosity to donate books to inmates THANK YOU! Your Kind Contributions have enriched mine and many lives in more ways than one.
Thanks Again



My Face when new Books arrive!

for the
brightest of moments, my spirit soared beyond these walls. I was free, it is truly astounding the power a good book wields.

first off I would to thank you all for given guys like me a change to think outside the box, by donating book that would help me become a better person or just to pass time. You are greatly appreciated...

Thank you so much for the last batch of books that you sent me 4+ months ago. It was perfect timing as I was sequestered in quarantine due to a COV ID outbreak amongst the inmate population and the extra reading gave me a positive way to spend the time. I hope that you have all been well and that the impact of the pandemic has been minimal to your lives.

Well, it is that time that I so look forward to as I forward another request to you and eagerly anticipate seeing how you respond to my updated list of titles. Thank you for the kind words you include with my orders and I'm glad that many have expressed the pleasure they experience filling my requests. I so appreciate all that you do for others and myself in providing this service to us and that appreciation extends to those who donate to your cause. I humbly thank you all!



U-C Books to Prisoners
A working group of the Independent Media Center
P.O. Box 515, Urbana, IL 61803

(Friday, con't. from p. 5)

"Maybe It'd be up front in Urban Fiction."

We go up front and start searching. I think it surprises them sometimes: when I crawl around on the floor looking for books on the bottom shelves, or when I loan them my reading glasses because they forgot theirs back in their cells. A little humanity. They don't expect it.

There's a good vibe in the library this morning. A couple guys argue about which Neil Gaiman novel their friend should read. Sam tries to spark interest in the trivia question that's written on the white board. Mr. Mason implores everyone to "show a little love for Mr. Patterson." Apparently, the shelf of James Patterson books needs to be better organized.

When the time's up, we help them check out their

items for the week. They can have up to eight books out at a time. I also write down a few requests. Mr. Bradley wants a large-text bible. Mr. Walker wants the fourth book in the Eragon series. Oh, and we need more Word Search books. We always seem to run out of those. Sometime before the next session, Lois will search our workroom of donated materials to see what she can come up with.

The Corrections Officer pats them down as they leave the library. As soon as one pod is taken back to their cells, another is brought in. By the end of the morning, we've served sixty-eight people. Of course each person *is unique. Each has their own story, issues, hopes for the future. But at this time, they're all struggling to some extent. At least they have something to read.* ♦

U-C Books to Prisoners is a working group of the Urbana Champaign Independent Media Center 202 S. Broadway Ave., Urbana, IL 61802 | www.ucimc.org | (217) 714-6300

DONATIONS AND BOOKS MAY BE SENT TO: UC BOOKS TO PRISONERS, P.O. Box 515, Urbana, IL 61803
Incarcerated people in Illinois may also write for books at this address.

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COMING SOON:

MONDAY, JANUARY 17, 2022 – MARTIN LUTHER KING JR DAY OF SERVICE AT THE IMC
APRIL 2022 – ROUND UP 4 GOOD FOR B2P AT COMMON GROUND FOOD COOP, URBANA