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Ontario experiences with institutional libraries

At a 2009 OLA session Joanne Lefebvre, long-time librarian at Collins Bay Institution, told about her experiences in the prison library. At that time, she estimated that 90 per cent of offenders have less than a Grade 12 education, and that 60 per cent have less than Grade 8. The rates of substance abuse and mental issues were similarly high. Unfortunately, these statistics show no signs of improving. What chance do prisoners have to integrate themselves today's society, with its high demands for print and information literacy, without help? The need is great.

There are many stories of those who went to prison and what they found there. To cite one example, Conrad Black, who acted as a volunteer tutor during his incarceration in a U.S. prison, commented on the great need for prisoners to get help in writing resumes and making choices so they could readapt to society. Black was in a U.S. prison, but there is no reason to believe the needs are any different across the border.

Though some prisons have schools where literacy is taught, the demand of those inside to fill the available places overreaches capacity. Prison life, moreover, is not known for its stability: one can be in an education program one day and on the bus, to another institution, the next. Libraries at provincial institutions, those that house prisoners with less than a two year sentence, are often poorly stocked, with staff part-time or non-existent . (I will speak of one exception in Ontario later in the program.)

What can a librarian do who wants to help?

That is a question some who have seen the need have asked. Today you will hear from some of them, and what they have accomplished to bring meaningful programs to those in prison. Perhaps some of these programs will help save a life, for it is true that prison programs can turn a life around, but it is not easy to get into a prison, even if you want to help, and they are here to offer suggestions. Red tape abounds, and the overarching consideration of the “safety and security of the institution” must take precedence over all else, but partnerships and persistence, and the help of volunteer coordinators can help.

The institutions spoken of today are provincial. There is an important distinction to be made in Canada between the federal and provincial prison. In Canada, provincial prisons house those with sentences of less than two years, whereas federal institutions hold inmates with longer, and therefore presumably more serious sentences. At Collins Bay, the federal prison near Kingston, Ontario, where I worked one year when Lefebvre was on leave, the library had a substantial collection of books and some funding for basic mandated collections, but the same does not apply to many provincial institution’s book collections. At Ontario provincial institutions I have visited, on the other hand, (unlike the one where I worked) some have only a book cart that circulates and from which residents grab a book of interest. It might be of interest, from a comparison point-of-view, to look at the \$200,000-250,000 budget for books I had at a California prison a few years ago. Most of it, however, went to purchase law books so as to comply with the state’s legal mandates, not for the reading or enlightenment of the prisoners.

My familiarity with Ontario Institutions goes back to my university days at Queen's back in the '70s. Some of my fellow students volunteered as tutors at institutions like the notorious federal prison, Kingston Pen, but that partnership between the prison and the university ended after the brutal Kingston Pen riots put safety and security back in first place as a prison concern.

Today I'm going to tell you a bit about my experience at the Ontario Correctional Institute, in Brampton, Ontario. The facility was built in the mid-seventies in an area then on the outskirts of the city. Unlike schools of the time, which had limited windows and seemed dark and dungeon-like, OCI was constructed around alcoves with trees and flowers and lots of light. Its construction always seemed to me predicated on the belief that a pleasant view might induce the residents to want to rejoin the outside world, not live forever outside of it.

It took me until 2012 to find OCI. I got a job as part-time Library Technician there after three years working at a school library in China, and couldn't have been more impressed by what I found. Simply put, OCI has features that one thinks every institution should have, but few do. It is designed to rehabilitate residents so that they can function outside, and has many programs that help them do so. It has a full-time volunteer coordinator who every year throws a thank you dinner for the 120 plus volunteers who regularly come to the prison.

I stepped into a library where I did not have to make connections; they were already in place. One of the regular volunteers, who helped with the "One-on-One" program, had a business where he had gone to malls selling goods at special events. He now limited this activity to coming to the prison to offer residents sales around Christmas and Mother's Day, with a

portion of the profits going to the International student sponsored by the institution's school. This was a way that the residents could "give back" to their community. I remember how one resident purchased over \$200 worth of goods and donated them all to a woman's shelter in order to make amends for hurt he had given.

Security at the Book Fairs, which were held in the Library, was vetted by me with the institution's security manager checking things over before they went on the sale tables. As far as I know, no contraband or unacceptable items ever slipped through. The partnership with the women's shelter I mentioned above was set up by one of the female guards.

It should be mentioned that the correctional staff as well as other staff bought into the helping, rehabilitative role of the institution; otherwise they would not have felt at home there. Other staff included Unit Managers who presided at twice a week unit meetings where all the residents of their units came to vent their problems, tell about their troubles, and try to find positive solutions. The Unit Managers also made sure that the residents were working on the programs prescribed by the psychologists to control their problems, whether substance-abuse or other related. There was a full-time Pre-release Officer who helped residents find employment and a place to live after release, and also to ease their transition to street life in other ways, as well as the previously mentioned Volunteer Coordinator. Psychologists were assigned to each unit to assist with the psychological problems of the residents.

In the Library I had a budget for books to add to the 12,000 or so in the collection. Donations also added to the collection. Partnerships with The Bridge, a local association set up to help residents, brought in book donations, as did occasional and substantial donations from the

man who put on the Book Fairs. Weeding was an issue, and I set up a partnership with Better World Books to clear out-of-date or unused materials. Though I would have liked to give surplus books to other institutions, most were hardcovers, which are not allowed at most institutions. That said, the Library space was substantial, with two large light-flooded rooms, which I tried to make sure were brightened further with flowers.

The 120 male residents would check out hundreds of books a month; I keep a record of this with the online system. If they wanted books that the Library didn't have, the understanding we had with the Brampton Public Library came to the rescue. I went to downtown branch of BPL every two weeks to pick up the books that had been requested. Residents had to sign a contract to return each book from BPL in good condition. Though some took a long time to finish, only one out of hundreds was ever damaged. The Coordinator for outside services at BPL called our record "extraordinary."

BPL also had a volunteer who conducted a Book Club in the Library Saturday mornings. Some of my assistants in the Library went to this and talked about the books they read.

In my view, OCI is an extraordinary place. It provides all those programs that all prisoners should have access to, but few do. To get into the prison, prisoners need to fill out an application; if they fail to complete the kind of programs they have promised to work on, they have to leave. Some find it too hard to change their lives, and don't finish the program, but I like to think that many benefit, and are able to stay out of institutions, by virtue of the programs provided to them here.

Further reading

Online

Lilienthal, Stephen. "Prison and Libraries: Public Service Inside and Out." *Library Journal*,
Posted February 4, 2013.

Looks at outstanding library prison programs and relationships with public libraries in the U.S.

Print

Schneider, Julia. "Has your Public Librarian Been in Prison?" *Interface*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Winter
2004.

Summarizes a session of the Library Services to Prisoners Forum of ASCLA at the American
Library Association Conference in Toronto, 2003. Speaks about the relationship between the
Salt Lake County Public Library and the Jail Library where I worked as Manager. The Jail Library
was, in fact, a branch of the County System.

Schneider. "Prison Libraries Save Lives." *American Libraries*, November 1996.

Schneider. "Report from the OLA Superconference session on prison libraries." *Interface*.
January 2009.

Vogel, Brenda. *The Prison Library Primer: A Program for the Twenty-First Century*. Lanham, MD:
Scarecrow Press, 2009.

U.S. context, but has many good points.