Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone: Bringing Family-Based Literacy to Local Prisons and Under-Served Communities

Carla Veitch – Gravenhurst Public Library
Introduction-

- ChIRP - 15 years
- Gravenhurst Public Library – 8 Years
- Early Childhood Educator
KNOCK KNOCK

MY DAD’S DREAM FOR ME

BY DANIEL BEATY ♦ ILLUSTRATED BY BRYAN COLLIER
Every morning, I play a game with my father. He goes KNOCK KNOCK on my door, and I pretend to be asleep till he gets right next to the bed. Then I get up and jump into his arms. “Good morning, Papa!”
And then one day the knock never comes.
I wait, but Papa’s not there to play our game.
And morning after morning he never comes.

He never comes to help me get ready for school.
He never comes to cook my favorite scrambled eggs. He never comes to help me with my homework after school.
I listen at the door, but I never hear his knock....
And then I think, *Maybe he comes when I’m not home.*
So I decide to write him a letter and leave it on my desk:
“Papa, come home, ‘cause I miss you,
miss you waking me in the mornings and telling me you love me.”
"Papa, come home, 'cause there are things I don't know, and when I get older I thought you could teach me how to dribble a ball, how to shave..."
...how to drive, how to fix the car.
“Papa, come home, 'cause I want to be just like you, but I'm forgetting who you are.”
Two whole months pass, and my letter to my papa still sits on my desk, but I leave it and wait for my papa’s knock.
And then one day I come home from school, and on my desk, I find a letter from my father:

TO MY DEAR SON
"Dear Son,
Ask your mama to help you make those scrambled eggs we love.
Remember to do your homework before you watch TV."
"I am sorry I will not be coming home.

"For every lesson I will not be there to teach you, hear these words:
“As you grow older, shave in one direction with strong, deliberate strokes to avoid irritation.

“Dribble the page with the brilliance of your ballpoint pen.”
“No longer will I be there to knock on your door, so you must learn to knock for yourself.

“KNOCK KNOCK” down the doors that I could not.
"KNOCK KNOCK" to open new doors to your dreams.

"KNOCK KNOCK" for me, for as long as you become your best, the best of me still lives in you.
“KNOCK KNOCK” with the knowledge that you are my son
and you have a bright, beautiful future.

“For despite my absence you are still here.”
"KNOCK KNOCK.
Who's there?

"You are."
AUTHOR’S NOTE

When I was a small child, my father was my principal caregiver. While my mother was at the office working, my father would change my diapers, feed me, and let me ride on his shoulders to the grocery store. He also woke me up each morning with our private Knock Knock game. When I was three, he was incarcerated. My mother took me to visit him in prison, and he was behind glass. This experience was traumatic for me, and I was not allowed to visit my father again in prison for many years. As I grew older, I became aware of the tremendous void created by my father’s absence. On my journey to adulthood, I realized how important it was for me to address the pain created by this separation. Later, as an educator of small children, I discovered how many of my students were also dealing with the loss of a father from incarceration, divorce, or sometimes even death. This experience prompted me to tell the story of this loss from a child’s perspective and also to offer hope that every fatherless child can still create the most beautiful life possible.

—Daniel Beaty

ILLUSTRATOR’S NOTE

I was inspired by the incredible monologue “Knock Knock” by Daniel Beaty when I saw it performed. His emotional delivery and the moving text of a boy’s struggles to navigate his way toward manhood—not completely alone but without the presence of his father—help set an emotional tone for the journey.

The art is created in watercolor and collage, and starts with the boy full of joy and light as he plays the Knock Knock game with his father. When his father is no longer there, the boy’s rainbow falls, and his world crumbles beneath his feet. The sky in the art is not so blue, which symbolizes the boy’s loss. But as we fast-forward well into his manhood, the boy’s days get better. However, he still longs for his father’s presence.

I connect with this story because it speaks to me as a son and a father, and I’m moved by the loss this child experiences without his father present to help answer life’s questions about how to trust and love and become whole. These are universal themes that are not bound by race, socioeconomic status, or gender. This book is not just about loss, but also about hope, making healthy choices, and not letting our past define our future.

—Bryan Collier
Age: 9
In my hand sewn dress.
ChIRP: Children of Inmate Reading Program
15 years
=
3000+ Books
Sent across Canada and as far away as China and Pakistan!
Initiative:

• Provide a direct connection for the child with his or her incarcerated parent.
• Opportunity of hearing a parent’s voice.
• Underscores the value of reading and the importance of books.
• Gives participants the experience of reading aloud to their child.
Inmates read from the heart

Around Muskoka Lakes
By Jack Hutton

Two weeks ago I was allowed inside the Beaver Creek Institution north of Gravenhurst for two unforgettable hours. I was there to talk to a young father who sat down once a month to record a child’s story for a son and daughter who aren’t old enough to realize that their dad is in prison.

Several months ago I first heard about a program called CHRPR (Children of Inmates Reading Program) that records the voices of inmates at both Beaver Creek and the much larger Penbrook Institution next door. The resulting CDs with the voices of inmates are sent to the families in a brief message from the dad.

Two remarkable Gravenhurst women, Carla Veitch and Beth Smith, volunteers at the Beaver Creek and Penbrook institutions, do the whole thing, showing up at both locations once a month to record a small group of fathers once by one.

Veitch, who got the idea for CHRPR after reading about a similar program in Alberta in 1995, does the recording with a basic tape recorder. She transfers the father’s stories from a cassette to CDs back at home, and mails the CDs along with a copy of the selected book to each family.

Smith is the organizer and greeter for each recording schedule, constantly cheerful and encouraging. She also helps those who need some help with their reading skills.

On Tuesday, Feb. 7, Veitch drove Beth Smith and myself to Beaver Creek where we were welcomed by assistant wardens Pam Gray and Bruce Aiken, the prison chaplain, after passing through security.

Athens, a former parolee at First Muskoka Congregational Church, had arranged for us to sit down with one of the inmates, Michael Wilson, who has recorded 48 CDs so far for his 7-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son.

I thought our discussion would be totally confidential, but Wilson, an incredibly thoughtful man in his 40s, said he had no problems with my using his name. “I want to help support this program,” he said, “and I know my daughter is proud of our talks.”

Wilson heard about CHRPR almost immediately after arriving at Penbrook, his first stop before Beaver Creek. “I gave my name in right away because I saw it as a way to stay in close contact with my children,” he says, “and especially with my daughter who asks questions if my latest CD is late. She has a little library in one side of her bedroom with all the books and the CDs. So it’s as if I’m right there in the bedroom with her.”

The daughter, now in Grade 2, has been helped in her reading by the extra support from her dad. Wilson, who read books like Data the Explorer to her at the beginning, says she now prefers anything written by Robert Munsch. “I’m on a Munsch hunt,” he chuckles.

A total of 25 inmates from the two institutions are involved in the CHRPR program. Calvary Baptist Church has been a great source of support since the program started, but Veitch is always in search of good quality children’s softcover books. Understandably, she prefers those with a moral message that will have a good influence on the youngsters. (You can reach her at carlavitch@hotmail.com.)

The next time you drive past the turn-off for our two correctional institutions, think about the loving fathers who stay in touch with their children through the CHRPR program and the two Gravenhurst women who have been quietly working that possible ever since 1995. Carla Veitch and Beth Smith both deserve hugs and yours this Valentine’s weekend.
BOOK CLUBS FOR INMATES

http://www.bookclubsforinmates.com/

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“First Books believes a child’s education is their way out of poverty. We work with educators and partners to identify and remove the barriers to learning and resources, creating equal access to quality education, and transforming the lives of kids in need”
Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents

A FREE Community Guide

Developed by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver in collaboration with:
The International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy,
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of the Fraser Valley,
With the Financial Support of Public Safety Canada and the Office of the Representative
of Children and Youth of British Columbia.

https://www.elizabethfry.com/
Statistics Canada:

- Approximately 10% of these admissions were women.
- 322,515 were adult male admissions.
- 52.8% of these men are fathers and have an average of 2.1 children
- 357,604 children affected by paternal incarceration in Canada.
- Represents 4.6% of the total population of 7,854,200 Canadian children who are 19 years of age or younger.

(Statistics Canada, 2004).
• Studies show that a child needs 1000 books read to them before they themselves begin to read.

• Reading aloud is the single most important thing a parent or caregiver can do to help a child prepare for reading and learning.
“It is a challenge for communities to recognize these forgotten or hidden children and because they fear exclusion and stigmatization they generally do not self-identify. There is no list of children of incarcerated parents. Protecting the privacy of children and families is important, and privacy protection laws and policies may make it difficult for agencies to share identifying information, even with those looking to help this group of children.”
“Reading aloud is the single most important thing a parent or care giver can do to help a child prepare for reading and learning”

“More than half the children in this country will not hear a bedtime story tonight”

I am very excited to connect with you in regards to an initiative that provides an opportunity to connect incarcerated family members with their children. This is an initiative that I have personally been involved with over the past eleven years at Beaver Creek institution with the support of the chaplains in the institution.

This program connects incarcerated parents and grandparents to their children in a meaningful and positive way. At Beaver Creek, we identify this program as ChIRP (Children of Inmates Reading Program), but it is also known in other locations as Parent Child Reading Program.

The program that I have been involved with is fairly simple to operate. Two enthusiastic volunteers enter the institution monthly, at a set time and set date and operate throughout the entire year. The volunteers bring with them a selection of quality children’s books that are able to be read in a short period of time and are suitable for children ranging in age from birth to 12 years of age. Each participant who has been cleared for the program, chooses a book and then reads that book to their child, while being recorded into a digital voice recorder. The recording is then transferred onto a CD. A pocket is glued into the front of the book, the CD is placed inside the pocket and the book is then mailed to the child.

Through the generous funding of and in partnership with BCFI (Book Clubs for Inmates), I have been given the opportunity to support and assist in the implementation of parent child reading programs with CSC staff who would like to see this initiative in their institution as well as to offer support, as requested and needed, to institutions who already have a reading program in place. All costs will be covered by BCFI and I will be able to train and support volunteers as well as provide the required equipment, books and materials needed to facilitate the program.

What an incredible way to connect children with their parents during a very difficult time and assist with the strengthening of family bonds which plays such a vital role in reintegration.

Please give this program your consideration and feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience to talk about next steps in your institution.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Carla Veitch carlaveitch@hotmail.com
Beaver Creek Institution

- a minimum and medium security federal prison operated by the Correctional Service of Canada in Gravenhurst, Ontario. It has a rated capacity of 717 inmates. The minimum security site was opened in 1961 and currently has the capacity to house 201 inmates in five residential style units.
Program helps inmates maintain family contact

by Boris Swidersky

Every few weeks, a Gravenhurst mother of four and grandmother of two gathers up some children’s books and her tape recorder and goes to jail.

Carla Veitch is the volunteer co-ordinator and organizer of the Children of Inmates Reading Program at Beaver Creek Institution in Gravenhurst. Every month or so, she sits down with the prison chaplain and records prisoners reading children’s books.

Veitch read about a similar program in a magazine last November, running in Brandon Correctional Centre in Manitoba.

“I read the article one night and thought this was amazing,” she said. “We’re living in a community with a facility like that so close.”

As soon as Wayne McCrackin, the prison chaplain gave the okay to run the program, Veitch and Beth Smith, a prison volunteer, approached the Gravenhurst Rotary Club and some other service clubs for donations.

By May, the program was operating at Beaver Creek. It was the first time Veitch had worked as a volunteer at a prison.

“This was something I never thought I’d do,” she said. “At first, I was apprehensive of coming here and thought, ‘What am I getting myself into?’ But Wayne and the staff and the dads have made me very comfortable. I have no idea about their lives. I only know where they are right now. I’m just thrilled that the program’s running here.”

To be accepted, inmates must have children under grade five and there must be no conditions that they cannot be in contact with the child.

The age limit is because of the type of books being used.

“It has to be something that can be read in a few minutes,” she said. Beaver Creek then contacts the family and if the family approves, the inmate is part of the program.

Once the book is selected, Smith helps the inmate with some practice runs. The inmate gives an introduction using his child’s name and saying, “This is your dad. I’m going to read to you from this book.” During the reading McCrackin plays a guitar chord to indicate the turning of a page.

“At the end of the book when the reading is done he’ll say, ‘I hope you enjoyed the book. Good night and I love you,’ said McCrackin.

“Then I head off to the post office the next morning and send it off,” said Veitch.

“So far, feedback has been really good,” said McCrackin.

“The dads love it and the children love it. They want to hear it every night and look forward to the next one.”

Inmate Les was the first dad to enrol in the program. He has done two tapes, one for each daughter. “It’s been really well received at home,” he said.

“The girls really, really enjoy it.”

Les recently had a family visit and his wife brought the books along so he could read them in person. He said his younger daughter reaches for her book several times a day and asks to have it read to her. He said that as he reads it, she responds to questions in the text because she’s got it all memorized.

“I wish it was running for my older children when I first started my sentence,” he said. “My psychologist said at the time that it would be beneficial to have that kind of verbal contact with the children.”

Veitch goes through a lot of books. “It costs $10 to $15 every time an inmate reads,” she said. Right now there are nine inmates in the program.

“The response from the community has been very good and we need that because we don’t have a budget,” said McCrackin.

“It’s a perfect program for minimum security. We think we’re the only facility in Ontario that’s doing it.”

The Children of Inmates Reading Program exists entirely through donations from people in the community. Anyone wishing to make a donation can call Carla Veitch at 687-5423.
*Children are never responsible for their parents’ choices. At the same time, they are the hidden victims not only in the justice and correctional system, but also within our larger community.*
A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove—but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.