

Books Behind and Beyond Bars

“Ten guards and the warden couldn’t have torn me out of those books. Months passed without even thinking about being imprisoned...I had never been so truly free in my life.”

Malcolm X

In May 2012, Kirsten Wurmman gave a presentation entitled Books Behind Bars at the Manitoba Libraries Conference. This presentation, and her leadership, resulted in about a dozen Winnipeg-based librarians and library technicians forming the Manitoba Library Association Prison Libraries and Reintegration Committee (MLA-PLC). By December of 2012, this tenacious group of volunteers had fashioned a book collection, created an Open Library for inmates at the Winnipeg Remand Centre (WRC), generated a weekly book deposit to all units of the WRC and had begun to engage in efforts to help former inmates of various institutions reintegrate into the community. And this is only the beginning....

History

The Manitoba Library Association Prison Libraries and Reintegration Committee (MLA-PLC) is inspired by the work of the Women’s Prison Subcommittee of the Greater Edmonton Library Association (GELA). Begun back in the winter of 2007, the GELA committee has been very active at a local Edmonton correctional institution. Programming ranges from book clubs, writers’ circles, and author talks, to art workshops and a borrowing program in partnership with the Edmonton Public Library. A prison library provides the inmates with a wide range of materials and information. The library supports courses and rehabilitation programs, helps to develop literacy skills, aids in the pursuit of personal and cultural interests, and supports life-long learning. This model encouraged the Winnipeg Remand Center (WRC) project, which began in November 2012. The project was spearheaded by members of the newly formed MLA-PLC with the support of administrative staff at the WRC.

Collection Development

At the inception of the project, each committee member/volunteer was required to take part in a tour of the WRC. This orientation highlighted the overcrowded conditions and the lack of books and programming for inmates. The committee was inspired to quickly begin collection development work. As the MLA-PLC is currently without a source of revenue, the primary materials used for the prison library collection are withdrawn items from the Winnipeg Public Library (WPL). As a foundation for the WRC collection, the materials chosen reflect the choices of WPL patrons with similar demographic characteristics. Materials

include high-interest fiction and non-fiction, biographies, aboriginal resources, graphic novels, and materials suitable for adult literacy learners. An additional reality that has influenced the materials chosen for the collection has been the list of restricted materials developed by the WRC administration. Prohibited materials include true-crime stories, anything that glorifies anti-social or criminal behaviour, and material that promotes violence towards women. No overtly sexualized material is allowed, and no hardcover materials or magazines are permitted.

The main challenges to maintaining a relevant and responsive collection for WRC patrons have been logistical. Individual requests cannot be fulfilled, because it is not known when an individual will be released or transferred. The WRC is temporary housing for most inmates. In addition, there is no operating budget with which to purchase materials, and the collection still consists solely of donations and weeded materials. These challenges have resulted in a collection-development framework best characterized by the phrase “Do the best you can with what you have!” (with the addendum “and keep working to see that what you have is more and more relevant”). It took approximately a month for the committee to assemble enough books to begin book-lending at the WRC.

Open Library

After consultations with WRC staff, it was decided that in order to allow prisoners some time away from their units, to give them a broader collection of books to choose from, and to give them the opportunity to talk with a library specialist, an Open Library would be

offered once a week. The Open Library is created by two committee member volunteers in the multi-purpose room. The volunteers put up a large library banner and tent signs that are used to promote genres such as “Aboriginal,” “Mystery/Thriller,” “Biographies,” and “We Recommend.” There are two cabinets filled with books that are stored at the WRC, and volunteers put out books on tables in the multi-purpose room. Each week an assigned WRC officer escorts a maximum of ten inmates from a particular unit into the library for a half-hour period. In this way, two or three groups of ten are able to attend each week. Volunteers are educated on safety protocols when relating with prisoners, and an officer is always present in the room. No volunteer has ever reported feeling unsafe. In fact, the interaction between volunteers and inmates has been very positive. Inmates have been polite, appreciative, enthusiastic, and good-humoured. All volunteers have greatly enjoyed their experiences at the Open Library. (A volunteer sign-up schedule had to be created to accommodate enthusiastic committee members.)

Typically, volunteers have engaged prisoners by asking such questions as, “Is there an author or title you are looking for?” or “What do you like to read?” This invites inmates to discuss their selections with volunteers and with one another. One inmate was overheard remarking to his friend about a book on beating stress: “Man, you should take that one out, you seem stressed at least once a day.” Another related that he’d read all of John Grisham and that anything by Grisham would be “great reading.” One man had recently discovered his Irish heritage and wanted to read W. B. Yeats. Requests have ranged from Dante’s *Inferno* and *The Catcher in the Rye* to Dean Koontz and Louis L’Amour. Aboriginal materials are in great demand, along with spirituality and self-help books. Non-fiction and especially biographies are sought after. Some readers are looking for “big thick” books that will last, while others want short and easy-to-read books with large print because of an inability to focus or a low literacy level. Graphic novels and comics have been especially popular. One man told us that he couldn’t read but his roommate would read to him. Each inmate is encouraged to keep a book longer than a week or to pass it along to a friend. There are no due dates. Inmates have been captivated with the idea of being able to choose their own books, and some have had trouble narrowing down their choices to just three titles, the maximum number allowed. The Open Library has been a wonderfully positive experience for volunteers, WRC staff, and inmates alike.

Weekly Unit Refresher

As time and staff restrictions will not allow inmates from all the units to attend the Open Library each week, it was decided by the committee, and agreed to by the WRC staff, that a box of books would be delivered to each unit once a week. These books remain on the unit until the following week and are then replaced. Inmates can keep the books as long as they want; as with books lent from the Open Library, there are no due dates. These bins allow inmates a new choice of books each week, regardless of whether they are able to attend the Open Library. While no statistical information has been gathered to date, based on the positive feedback from staff and inmates, the project has been an unqualified success.

Beyond Bars

The MLA-PLC began its efforts in assisting with reintegrating former inmates into the community by first meeting with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba (EFSM), a non-profit organization that helps women in the justice system with a host of reintegration issues, in November 2012. Former inmates face a number of challenges upon release from custody. These include obtaining resources to improve literacy, numeracy, parenting, and financial management skills; securing and maintaining employment and accommodations; and establishing social networks that support a crime-, drug-, and alcohol-free lifestyle.

At the first meeting, the EFSM advised the MLA-PLC members that budget cuts limited the amount of programming they could provide to former inmates. Limited funding also restricted the availability of staff and facilities to daytime hours, which then affected volunteer recruitment. In reviewing daytime availability, it was decided that a book club would be the easiest program to attempt. The book club was scheduled for every second Wednesday during the afternoon in the site’s programming room. The initial registration consisted of six women, out of which two regularly attended. In order to address concerns regarding the level of literacy and interest among the community, Suzanne Collins’s young adult novel *The Hunger Games* was chosen. The WPL had already withdrawn multiple copies, which were thus available for use by the book club. The two women who regularly attended the meetings admitted that they found it difficult to finish the book due to content and length, so the movie was shown at the end of the month. The book club members expressed interest in reading non-fiction titles, preferably biographies of strong female characters.


Due to the restricted availability of the EFSM programming room, other venues are being approached to provide programming beyond bars, so we can continue to help former inmates in their successful reentry into the community. Inspired by a 2005 *Feliciter* article by Stephanie Kripps,¹ committee volunteers are working with the John Howard Society and other inner-city agencies to explore opportunities for developing library services within the reentry program. These opportunities include on-site reference services at transitional homes, information literacy workshops, public education sessions, and computer training.

Future Plans

The MLA-PLC's efforts continue to evolve as more volunteers begin work with the program. Ideas for further services include:

- Attending resource fairs at correctional institutions to provide information regarding library services.
- Providing drop-in reference services at transitional houses.
- Coordinating library tours through established reintegration resources.

- Organizing author readings, adult read-alouds, and booktalks at the WRC.

The enthusiasm and excitement about the work done to date is infectious, and the committee looks forward to expanding and enhancing its work. 

The Manitoba Library Association – Prison Library Committee was formed in June 2012 and is made up of librarians, library technicians, library staff, supporters, and students. The committee is bound by the common belief that the prison library (whether it is a physical space or a book cart) is a vital information resource that helps contribute to the successful community reentry of offenders. Anyone interested in volunteering or donating to the Prison Library committee is encouraged to contact manitobalibrary@gmail.com for more information.

Note

1. Stephanie Kripps, "Reference by Hanging Around: Our Back Porch Info Centre." *Feliciter* 51, no. 6 (2005): 262.



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