

servicing teens doing TIME



► KATHY McLELLAN AND TRICIA SUELLENTROP

Many of us started in library work believing in the “power of literature” to inform and enrich our lives. We want to make a difference in our communities—and sometimes the programs and materials that we offer succeed in surprising ways, in unusual places, and with unexpected people.

For about eight years, we’ve been facilitating two literature programs—one in a lock-down facility and one as a probation alternative—for teens who are not only “at risk” but also often in real peril. Both programs emanate from a 1997 community process in response to local juvenile justice reform. Two library programs emerged from the ensuing task force, Read to Succeed, a literature program for teens incarcerated at the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC), and Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL), an alternative sentencing program based on a Massachusetts model (<http://www.cltl.umassd.edu>).

READ TO SUCCEED: PROGRAM ELEMENTS

On our first visit to the Juvenile Detention Center, it was no surprise that we were asked first to walk through a metal detector, next

through doors that automatically locked behind us, and then through a winding maze of hallways. But what was and continues to be a shock is how well the teens respond to our visits and to the stories and books we bring.

The scene is set for us at the JDC, where little television is allowed, pencils and pens are considered contraband and are closely regulated, and the only thing that residents are allowed to have in their cells is a paperback book. A year before we started Read to Succeed, the pool tables and big screen television had been removed. The JDC administrators were looking for alternatives to “fill in the dead time” for the residents. Two attorneys serving on the community ad hoc task force for juvenile-justice reform—one of whom was a library board member—urged the administration to ask the library for help. The JDC staff had no preconceived ideas about what we should do, so we were free to experiment.

With this challenge, we started a deposit collection with Read to Succeed stickers, which evolved over a few years into an issues-driven literature discussion with booktalks and read-aloud sessions. Booktalking to the kids wasn’t enough to engage them.

A YEAR OF READ TO SUCCEED

JANUARY

Theme: Nonviolence/Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Read Aloud: *Biderbiks Don't Cry* by Avi from **From One Experience to Another** or *Priscilla and the Wimps* by Richard Peck from **Who Do You Think You Are? Stories of Friends and Enemies**, selected by Hazel Rochman.

Books Used: *The Words of Martin Luther King Jr.*, selected by Coretta Scott King, **Strength to Love** by Martin Luther King Jr., and **Ironman** by Chris Crutcher.

Questions: Who is MLK? In what did he believe? How did he get his message across? What is civil disobedience? Is physical force the only way to gain respect?

FEBRUARY

Theme: Attitude

Read Aloud: *The Fury* by T. Ernesto Bethancourt from **Ultimate Sports: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults**, edited by Donald R. Gallo.

Books Used: **The Contender**, **The Chief**, and **The Brave** by Robert Lipsyte.

Questions: What should Randy have done? What do you think of the uncle's treatment of the main character?

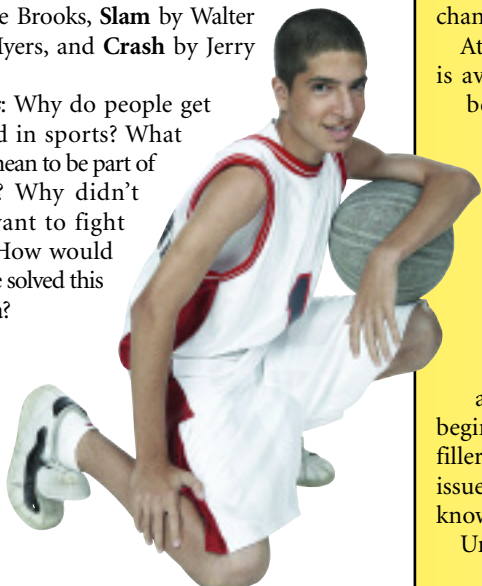
MARCH

Theme: Sports

Read Aloud: *The Other Pin* from **Athletic Shorts** by Chris Crutcher.

Books Used: **Moves Make the Man** by Bruce Brooks, **Slam** by Walter Dean Myers, and **Crash** by Jerry Spinelli.

Questions: Why do people get involved in sports? What does it mean to be part of a team? Why didn't Petey want to fight Chris? How would you have solved this dilemma?



GOALS OF READ TO SUCCEED

- Increase awareness and visibility of the public library as an important community resource.
- Provide interest and age-appropriate library materials and programs.
- Provide positive role models and situations through various styles of literature.
- Encourage problem solving, decision making, and awareness of the responsibilities and consequences of actions through discussion of literature.

Although the JDC does not have statistics on the program's outcomes, the residents, JDC supervisors, and school district teachers assigned to JDC enthusiastically endorse the program.

Our biggest concern was doing something that they wouldn't laugh at or be hostile about—and that they wouldn't think was stupid. We knew that reading was “uncool” for these kids, but we also realized that they had nothing to do but read. And asking them their opinions and letting them talk about what they read was “cool.”

We dove in, searching everywhere for relevant short stories that we could read aloud, which would be followed by discussions using open-ended questions. For a few years, we carefully worked together to develop a list of questions for each session; we do that less after years of experience with the process and the same works.

The JDC can be a very intimidating environment, especially in the beginning, and even now we are occasionally reminded of the potential for danger. We learned “classroom management” as we went, always accompanied by an officer. We don't allow

inappropriate language in discussions, but we add the disclaimer that such language will be read aloud as it appears in the text. What we found, though, was that the teens are very enthusiastic about our visits, perhaps because they can be themselves with us and because they know that we won't get them in trouble for the ideas they express in discussion. There is a sense of relief on their part, a feeling of being safe with us because they know that we are really their advocates and not looking to get them in trouble.

For the first two years, we presented sessions together. When the residents protested that there weren't enough “library lady sessions,” causing some teens to be left out, we split up, doubling the number of sessions available—twice per month during the school year and once per week during the summer.

We begin each forty-five-minute session by arranging the seats in a circle, introducing ourselves, and giving an outline of what will happen. Then everyone has the opportunity to tell what they're reading and a few sentences about it. Next we read aloud a short story or chapter from a book. If the teens complain that they “don't need to be read to,” we reply that “everyone here knows how to read” (which might not be the case in actuality), “but there are different levels of listening ability in the room and developing listening skills is equally important.” With that basis, everyone is able to participate in the discussion.

Peer pressure, betrayal, anger, and prejudice are themes for discussion that involve both residents and JDC staff, who are asked to participate. Through stories relevant to their lives, the teens explore the impact of personal decisions on others, the cause-and-effect relationship between actions and consequences, and the opportunities for personal change through different choices.

At the session's conclusion, a fresh batch of paperback books, mostly from donations, is available. Approximately ten to fifteen residents participate in each session, and because the clientele of the JDC shifts constantly, we serve approximately 1,200 residents per year. The annual cost is \$200 to \$500 to purchase new paperback books and pay for staff time.

We find that these teens are not so different from teens in the outside world; consistent, positive attention makes a huge difference. And although many are responsible for their predicaments, they often come from a situation that is part of the problem and over which they have little control.

Why does this program work? We've observed that their stay at the JDC allows teens to slow down and become able to focus on something—a book or a certain subject—because of being away from temptations and distractions and having time away from friends or family who might not be supportive. This time allows them to begin to understand “the system” and how the world works. Reading starts as a time-filler, but it becomes pleasurable in approximately 60 percent of the cases. Discussing issues and their thoughts and ideas about those issues—especially with people they don't know—is the beginning of growing up.

Unlike in the classroom, the discussion field is level because there are no right or

wrong answers, although the teens are accountable for their opinions. The end is not about answers but about discussion and self-discovery. We originally thought that we would have nothing in common with these young people, but once we started discussions, we found that we have everything in common—which we believe reduces the detainees sense of isolation.

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE: PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL) is a seven-week program held in a library branch for two hours weekly. An average of eight teens whose sentences require completion of the program participate. These teens are referred by judges and probation officers and are screened for their literacy level. In the summer of 2004, we held our first female teen session. (CLTL sessions are with single-gender groups.) Each group also includes one of us as the facilitator, a judge, and a probation officer. With the same participants each week, we can have in-depth discussion of full-length books.

A key element of success in CLTL is being able to discuss an issue on a peer level with a judge and a probation officer. The teens mention the judges, especially in their written comments. From the stories and the discussions, they also come to perceive the cause-and-effect of life's choices, saying, "It's all about choices; it really made me think," "Got me to think about myself and my actions," and "I've never thought before how fear relates to anger." In our first year, one boy wrote, "I think I'll go to college now." That is a powerful change.

One book that never fails to elicit great discussion is **Breathing Underwater** by Alex Flinn. It seems impossible that violent and controlling behavior would be prevalent in teen relationships, but it appears to be true. One participant came to the session without the book and without having finished it. Initially we were upset, fearing that he would have to return to court for not fulfilling the conditions of the program. During discussion, we discovered that he didn't have the book because he'd given it to his girlfriend to read, hoping that she would recognize their troubled (abusive) relationship as he had. Further discussion revealed that he was seriously considering ending their relationship because he now saw where it could lead. He and other readers have discovered through this book that they were in relationships with overly controlling partners and wanted to make a change. They also observed the effects that drugs and alcohol have on people and their behavior.

CLTL's positive effects are evident not only in anecdotal stories but also in dramatically lower incidences of probation revocation than the norm: Recidivism figures are 29 percent for adults and 17 percent for teens in CLTL, compared with 58 percent for other corrections clients.

Costs for the program are minimal, with libraries donating facilitator time and using library books. We feel strongly, however, that participants should be able to keep the books they read, and we've been able to fund this plan with donations and a local alcohol tax fund grant in the amount of \$5,000 per year since 2000. Facilitators for the adult CLTL sessions are paid \$750 per session, and books average about \$15 each, six books per participant per session. The judges donate their time, and the probation officers are scheduled. A local Pizza Shoppe restaurant donates pizza and drinks for the teens' last meetings.

Johnson County Library was the first public library, to our knowledge, to implement this type of interactive literature discussion programming with teens in the justice system. It is book discussion facilitation customized with a twist. We feel that it is uniquely a "library" program because it draws the youth into literature. Immersing the participants in literature "shuts out the noise" and allows them to discover their "inner life," what makes them unique. It's a new kind of outreach for libraries to explore. Although it is challenging to build and maintain the partnerships, the results are truly rewarding.

Occasionally we see some of these teens in a library or run into them in the community, at a grocery store, or at a restaurant. According to justice system rules of

THE GOALS OF CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE

- Positively affect participating offenders' long-term decision-making skills regarding drug and alcohol use and criminal activity.
- Reduce the number of repeat offenses and revocations of probation among participants.

Serving approximately sixty people per year, of which one-third are teens, this program is a collaboration among the Johnson County Library, Johnson County Corrections Department, Johnson County District Court, and Johnson County Community College (where adult sessions meet).

APRIL

Theme: Poetry

Read Aloud: Poems from **Behind the Wheel: Poems about Driving** by Janet Wong.

Books Used: **Do You Hear Me?**, edited by Betsy Franco, or any poetry collection.

Questions: How did you learn to drive? Write a haiku poem (5, 7, 5 syllables) about a driving experience you've had.

MAY

Theme: Parents/Sex/Responsibility

Read Aloud: *The Driving Lesson* from **Rearranging and Other Stories** by David Gifaldi.

Questions: What would you do if you "caught" your son/daughter? Have you had a similar talk with your parents? Who should explain sex to children/teens? What do you think about the "Worth-It" test? Would you pass? What things do you look for in a person?

JUNE

Theme: Trouble

Read Aloud: *Greasy Lake* from **Greasy Lake and Other Stories** by T. Coraghessan Boyle.

Questions: What happened in this story? Do you know a place like Greasy Lake? What was their first mistake? What would you have done in this situation? How could they have handled it differently? Were they really "bad" characters?

JULY

Theme: Crime and Violence

Read Aloud: *Small Scams* by Gary Soto from **Petty Crimes** and the statistics from **Twelve Shots: Outstanding Short Stories About Guns**, edited by Harry Mazer.

Books Used: **The Rifle** by Gary Paulsen and **Swallowing Stones** by Joyce McDonald.

Questions: What are your thoughts about guns? Is it easy to get a gun? Should anyone be able to own a gun? What consequences should there be for people who are careless with their guns? Do you know how other countries handle the gun issue?



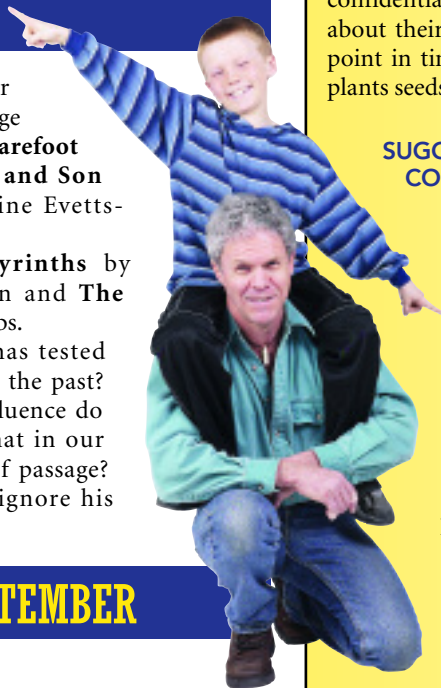
AUGUST

Theme: Finding Your Way/Rites of Passage

Read Aloud: *The Barefoot Book of Father and Son Tales* by Josephine Evetts-Secker.

Books Used: *Labyrinths* by Philippe Mignon and *The Maze* by Will Hobbs.

Questions: What has tested your character in the past? What kind of influence do fathers have? What in our society is a rite of passage? Why did Icarus ignore his father's advice?



SEPTEMBER

Theme: Bad Days

Read Aloud: *A Reasonable Sum* by Gordon Korman from *Connections:*

Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults, edited by Donald R. Gallo, and *Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst.

Questions: Describe a bad or embarrassing day you have experienced. How do you deal with a bad day? Can you stop yourself from having a bad day? When does a bad day become funny?

OCTOBER

Theme: Science Fiction

Read Aloud: *The Wilding* from *Twelve Impossible Things Before Breakfast* by Jane Yolen and *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak.

Questions: Where in society is our outlet for energy? Can there ever be a place like Wild Wood Central? Would you go there if you could? What is a Max?

NOVEMBER

Theme: Community Service

Read Aloud: *Shacks to Mansions* or *Box Nine* from *Doing Time: Notes From the Undergrad* by Rob Thomas.

Questions: Why is community service important? Why do people take time in their lives to do community service? Why is community service sometimes part of high school graduation requirements?

confidentiality, they must acknowledge us first, and often they do, sharing good news about their lives—or what they've been reading! Introducing literature at this critical point in time provides not only a very real possibility of changing their lives but also plants seeds for the lives they will change—their friends, families, and communities.

SUGGESTED READING FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS AT THE JOHNSON COUNTY JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER

Anderson, Elijah. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. W. W. Norton, 1999. 224p. \$25.95. 978-0-393-04023-4. \$16.95 Trade pb. 978-0-393-32078-7.

Allen, Bud, and Diana Bosta. *Games Criminals Play: How You Can Profit By Knowing Them*. Rae John Publishers, 1981. 228p. \$19.95 Trade pb. 978-0-9605226-0-6.

Bayse, Daniel J. *Helping Hands: A Handbook for Volunteers in Prisons and Jails*. American Correctional Association, 1993. 78p. \$9.50 Trade pb. 978-0-929310-85-5.

Corwin, Miles. *And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-City High School Students*. William Morrow, 2000. 432p. \$25. 978-0-380-97650-8. \$14. Trade pb. 978-0-380-79829-2.

Hume, Edward. *No Matter How Loud I Shout: A Year in the Life of Juvenile Court*. Simon & Schuster, 1997, ©1996. 400p. \$15 Trade pb. 978-0-684-81195-6. VOYA December 1999.

Karr-Morse, Robin, and Meredith S. Wiley. *Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997. 384p. \$27. 978-0-87113-703-6. \$16 Trade pb. 978-0-87113-734-0.

Osofsky, Joy D. *Children in a Violent Society*. Guilford Press, 1997. 338p. \$50. 978-1-57230-183-2. \$29 Trade pb. 978-1-57230-387-4.

Post, Linda Williams. *Stony Ground: One Teacher's Fight Against Juvenile Crime*. Eakin Press, 1994. 239p. OP. 978-0-89015-918-7.

Prothrow-Stith, Deborah. *Deadly Consequences: How Violence Is Destroying Our Teenage Population and a Plan to Begin Solving the Problem*. HarperCollins, 1991. 288p. \$13 Trade pb. 978-0-06-092402-7.

Salzman, Mark. *True Notebooks*. Knopf, 2003. 352p. \$24. 978-0-375-41308-7. \$13.95 Trade pb. 978-0-375-72761-0. VOYA April 2004.

WEB SITES

The Center on Juvenile and Crime Justice. <http://www.cjcj.org>.

JoCoFamily.net. <http://www.jocofamily.net>.

Changing Lives Through Literature: An Alternative Sentencing Program. <http://www.cctl.umassd.edu>.

FICTION ABOUT YOUTH IN JUVENILE DETENTION SETTINGS

Ferris, Jean. *Bad*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998. 192p. \$16. 978-0-374-30479-9. \$5.95 Trade pb. 978-0-374-40475-8. VOYA February 1999. 5Q 4P J S

Gilstrap, John. *Nathan's Run*. HarperCollins, 1996. 304p. \$23. 978-0-06-017385-2.

Rottman, S. L. *Hero*. Peachtree, 1997. 144p. \$14.95. 978-1-56145-159-3. \$7.95 Trade pb. 978-1-56145-427-3. VOYA December 1997. 4Q 4P M J S

Sachar, Louis. *Holes*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998. 235p. \$16. 978-0-374-33265-5. \$10.95 Trade pb. 978-0-7862-6190-1. VOYA December 1998. 4Q 4P M J

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE

February–March, 2006
Blue Valley Library 6:30–8:30

February 18

Short Stories: *Greasy Lake* by T. Coraghessan Boyle

Discussion about the purpose of this program and what to expect.

EXPECTATIONS

You will be expected to

- Attend all sessions.
- Read and finish all books.
- Participate in discussions.
- Follow along and listen to read-aloud selections.

Theme: Prejudice

Read Aloud: *The Photograph* by Will Weaver from **No Easy Answers**, edited by Donald R. Gallo.

Books Used: *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher.

Questions: Have you ever experienced prejudice? Have you ever been prejudiced against someone else? What causes one to feel prejudice? Can you change your feelings? Why did Andy return the negative. Is there something about you that you would *not* want publicly known?

SPARES

Theme: Bullies

Read Aloud: *A Letter from the Fringe* by Joan Bauer from **On the Fringe**, edited by Donald R. Gallo.

Books Used: *The Body of Christopher Creed* by Carol Plum-Ucci and *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser

Questions: What is cool? Why do certain groups pick on other groups? Can you ignore people like Doug? Have you ever been picked-on? Will the letter work?

Theme: Controlling Relationships

Read Aloud: *Belonging to the Dragon* by Bernice Friesen from **Close-ups: Best Stories for Teens**, edited by Peter Carver.

Books Used: *Breathing Underwater* by Alex Flinn and *Past Forgiving* by Gloria Miklowitz.

Questions: Do you belong to someone you're dating? Can you change someone's behavior if you love that person enough?

Kathy McLellan is the Youth Outreach Librarian for Johnson County Library in the Kansas City metropolitan area, providing services and materials for young people unable to visit the library. She has just been appointed to the Association for Library Services to Children's (ALSC) Liaisons with National Organizations Serving Children and Youth Committee. She developed "Books to Grow" kits for outreach to childcare providers, which received an Innovations in American Government Award.

*Tricia Suellentrop is Johnson County Library's Youth Services Manager in 2006. She is a certified "Serving the Underserved" Trainer through the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and currently serves on its Michael L. Printz Award Committee. She co-authors the Teenage Riot column in **School Library Journal** and co-authored the third edition of **Connecting Young Adults and Libraries** (Neal-Schuman, 2004/VOYA February 2005).*

*Kathy and Tricia were co-recipients of **Library Journal's** 2005 Movers and Shakers for the work they do with teens in the juvenile justice system.*

February 25

Touching Spirit Bear by Ben Mikaelson (240 pages)

After his anger erupts into violence, Cole, in order to avoid going to prison, agrees to participate in a sentencing alternative based on the Native American Circle Justice, and he is sent to a remote Alaskan island where an encounter with a huge Spirit Bear changes his life.

March 3

Hero by S. L. Rottman (134 pages)

After years of abuse from his mother and neglect from his father, ninth-grader Sean Parker is headed for trouble when he is sent to do community services at a farm owned by an old man who teaches Sean that he can take control of his own life.

March 10

Breathing Underwater by Alex Flinn (263 pages)

Sent to counseling for hitting his girlfriend, Caitlin, and ordered to keep a journal, sixteen-year-old Nick recounts his relationship with Caitlin, examines his controlling behavior and anger, and describes living with his abusive father.

March 24

Swallowing Stones by Joyce McDonald (245 pages)

Dual perspectives reveal the aftermath of seventeen-year-old Michael MacKenzie's birthday celebration during which he discharges an antique Winchester rifle and unknowingly kills the father of high school classmate Jenna Ward.

April 7

Hole in My Life by Jack Gantos (200 pages)

The author relates how, as a young adult, he became a drug user and smuggler, was arrested, did time in prison, and eventually got out and went to college, all the while hoping to become a writer.

April 14

The Giver by Lois Lowry (180 pages)

Given his lifetime assignment at the Ceremony of Twelve, Jonas becomes the receiver of memories shared by only one other in his community and discovers the terrible truth about the society in which he lives.

ADDITIONAL TITLES

Black and White by Paul Volponi

Ironman and Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher

Night by Elie Wiesle

Fallen Angels by Walter Dean Myers

This Boy's Life: A Memoir by Tobias Wolff ■



PHOTO CREDIT: MARY RILEY

◀ TRICIA SUELLENTROP AND KATHY MCLELLAN PREPARE BOOKS FOR A JDC TEEN VISIT.