

When talking about the library she runs in the Alameda County (Calif.) Juvenile Justice Center, Amy Cheney gets right to the point:

It's not just about the library. It's not even just about the books. It's about the youth who are incarcerated here. It's about showing them that they can change their lives. It's about introducing them to people who have had similar experiences, who have been in gangs, or in prison, or hooked on drugs, and who have decided to change their lives and accomplished it, and then written about their experiences. "This is how I got out, and how you can get out too." These are people the kids here can identify with, who can show them that there are options. They *can* choose to succeed.

Cheney has worked at the center since 1999, when a small grant allowed Alameda County Library to begin the Write to Read program, bringing in local and nationally known authors to speak to and meet the teens she serves. Today, the people she brings in are amazing, but she grew her credibility slowly and carefully. Some of the writers who have participated in the program are Terry Macmillan, Dolores Huerta, Terence Howard, Michael Eric Dyson, Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers, Victor Martinez, Zlata Filipovic, Zac Ungler, Victor Rivers, Cupcake Brown, Ishmael Beah, and more. Many of them come back more than once, some on an annual basis, because they see the value of what they say

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# It's All About the Kids

## Presenting Options and Opening Doors

*By Joni Richards Bodart*

to the kids and the response they get.

"What these people have to say has the possibility of making a huge impact on the kids here. Dolores Huerta cofounded the United Farm Workers with Cesar Chavez, and when she came to talk about what they did and why, she had the kids in the Max Unit reading Ghandi after her visit. Ghandi!" Cheney shakes her head in wonder.

### The Center's Population

Cheney knows what she's talking about when she describes the teens she works with.

The most important thing is to

get the kids excited about reading and writing, and to use that to help them connect with the world at large. They're disenfranchised. They may not have been introduced to standard concepts basic to our society. You tell them that men and women are equal, and they say, 'Huh?' It's a new concept, because of the way they've been raised, or had to raise themselves. They've been marginalized. Many of the youth incarcerated here don't understand the concept of their opinions having merit, or their lives having value. Sometimes when people get locked up, it's the first time they've had a chance to stop and take a look at what's going on in their lives. When they are here, they have clothes to wear, a place to live, food—that's not always true 'on the outs.' There, they are spending so much time taking care of necessities and staying alive, they don't have a chance to take a look at the big picture. When their basic needs are met, then they

can begin to look at themselves and their lives—how they got here, and how they can get to a better place.

The vast majority of the youth Cheney works with have been severely abused mentally, sexually, and physically. They have been neglected, forced to grow up on their own, without adult advice and support, or with advice that's designed to help them survive in their world, rather than get away from it or overcome it. They've been in and out of prison, and so have most of their families and friends. Their chronological ages and their experiences are completely out of synch. They have had adult experiences, but they're completely unequipped to deal with them emotionally because their emotional age is that of a child. Their worlds are often small, constricted, and difficult to escape or change. Books can open a window out of those worlds, and meeting authors who have escaped can confirm that there *are* ways out.

## Collection Development

Helping the youth she serves change their lives is Cheney's first goal, and everything else she does supports it. She wants them to have a chance to reflect on their lives, and on the opportunities available to them to make changes in those lives. Books are selected on the basis of their impact on the reader, books that reflect their world and themselves, but also need to show a way out of that world.

*Too Beautiful for Words*, by Monique Morris, examines the world of prostitutes, pimps, and drugs, and a child born into that world who has to decide whether or not he will follow his father's footsteps. Through a relationship with a Black Panther, he begins to question his own actions, and think more clearly about his life and what he wants it to be. The reader is inspired to think about the cost of making

mistakes, examine the reasons behind people's actions, question the characters' decisions, and consider the beliefs, right and wrong, that led to those decisions. Sophia, one of Cheney's volunteers, who has her own success story and is listening to the conversation while she shelves books, puts it succinctly as she describes the kind of books Cheney buys for her library: "[They] make you question your actions, instead of affirming them."

When teens come into the library wanting a book on gangs and killing, Cheney hands them Ishmael Beah's book, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. Set in Africa, it details Beah's life as it is transformed overnight when his whole village is killed. He is recruited into the army, encouraged to kill in retaliation for his family's deaths, and eventually becomes as addicted to killing as he is to cocaine. Years later, he's brought to a rehabilitation center, and slowly begins to rebuild his life. Youth are able to identify with Beah's life (even though it is set in another world and another country), recognize the emotions he expresses, and see how he was able to redeem himself. Beah's book is a 2008 Alex Award Winner.

In contrast, *C-Murder's Death around the Corner* is adult urban lit that reflects the real life these kids know only too well—but that's all. It doesn't take the next step, and let readers know that they don't have to stay stuck in that life, that there's a way out. "C-Murder's message is not the message I want to be sending," Cheney said. "I don't have those kinds of books in my library—I can't justify them, not to me, not to the staff, not to the administration. They don't serve the needs of the youth here." Cheney knows the importance and the value of the trust that teachers, staff, youth, and administration have in her and in the library collection, and is unwilling to jeopardize it.

*A Place to Stand*, by Jimmy Santiago Baca, is another example of a man who was able to redeem himself through his writ-

ing, but it also recounts his adolescence in a series of juvenile halls, his years as a drug dealer, and a dark and detailed account of life in a maximum security prison, including lengthy solitary confinements. Most boys have seen the film *Blood in, Blood Out*, and are ready to read the book it was based on. In his book, Baca shows both his public mask and the inner persona behind the bravado, and reveals the emotions of someone who has been abandoned. His readers see the why behind his actions. They find the gangs and violence they wanted to read about, but they also get a powerful statement on the redemptive power of books and reading. Something to identify with, something to inspire.

## Circulation and the Honor System

Cheney is careful to make sure that coming to the library and having books available is a positive experience. Teens have access to books 24/7, in the library, in the tall bookshelf in each of the units, and in their own rooms. Everything is run on the honor system—only four books in their rooms, although they can check out what they need and keep them on the bookshelf in their unit, and no graffiti or damaging books. When books are checked out, they are examined for graffiti, and when found, it's erased or crossed out.

If I punish the kids, they will be a lot more likely to quit coming in or reading at all. Graffiti is a part of their world, and they don't define it as wrong. I want this to be a pleasant place, and reading a fun thing to do. So I spend time talking about the importance of the honor system, being responsible for themselves, and treating the books with respect. I respect them by providing clean books about things they want to

read about. They show respect for the library and the books by helping them stay clean and undamaged.

“On the outs” it would be disrespectful to erase one of your own gang’s tags—it would never happen. But inside, it’s a different culture. Books are valued and respected. I’ve never had anyone refuse to erase graffiti, no matter who did it. Education, not punishment.

The library is arranged more like a bookstore than a public library. Books are grouped by subject, but not according to the Dewey Decimal System. Cheney uses a system of twenty-one genres/subject areas to divide up her collection. The largest groups are books by or about African Americans or Latinos, and include both fiction and nonfiction. She has both adult and young adult materials, and many teens gravitate toward the adult titles because they see themselves more clearly in them. And many want truth not fiction, so “True Stories” is another large category. Lots of the books are shelved cover-out, to encourage visitors to pick them up. Since volunteers like Sophia do the reshelving, the arrangement must be overt, logical, and easy to follow. It’s not about keeping everything in precisely the correct place—it’s about making sure everyone can find what they’re looking for.

## “Books and Reading are Cool Here.”

Cheney sees her role as a caretaker, something many of these youth have never had. “I have a moral and ethical obligation to provide the very best for these teens. I’m committed to helping them get a new perspective on life, showing them options and alternatives, helping them understand the context of their lives, and create their own set of ethics, their own sense of integrity, in

the face of difficult decisions. I want to help bring them into the larger world that exists outside the little box that’s been their life.”

Sophia breaks in again. “It’s more than just having books. What Amy does here, when she brings in authors and introduces books, is truly magic. She shows us how much difference just one book can make in our lives.” And Sophia knows what she’s talking about. As a teen, she was involved “in all things negative,” and heading down to road to long-term incarceration. But now she is a young mother and a full-time university student majoring in sociology and planning to go to law school. She went from being a statistic to being a success, and is devoted to helping teens, especially young incarcerated mothers, get the help they need to succeed as well.

Today, books, reading, and writing are integral parts of the lives of teens incarcerated here. In what might seem to be a most unlikely place, there is a culture of excitement about books, a motivation to read, and an understanding of reading’s importance and life-changing power. Even the janitor has stopped Cheney in the hall to talk about books and reading, and his excitement about an upcoming author, Farrah Gray. Involving everyone at the center is the true key to the program’s success. Everyone is invested, supporting it, and aware of the positive results. The library is one of the central parts of the center, helping staff and administration make positive changes in the lives of the teens who must stay there.

## How to Start a Library in Your Facility

When considering starting a library program in a juvenile facility, there are several factors that need to be addressed. First of all, it’s essential to value the institution you are affiliating with, and the people who staff it. You are coming into facility as a stranger, and if you haven’t worked in

a prison setting, you are also coming in as a novice, no matter how much you know about books and kids on the outside. This is different, *very* different, and it’s important to learn the rules and the culture before starting to make changes.

Following the rules, learning the culture, valuing the staff and youths’ knowledge and wisdom, and letting them teach you, will win their trust and approval, both of which are essential for your program’s success. It also allows you to become part of the family, and gradually gain their respect, earning more influence and status for both you and your program.

Administrative trust and support are key. An organization reflects the philosophy of its leaders, and when they are on board with the library, it will be much more quickly seen as an integral part of the organization. Administrators can also promote the library and literacy to a wide variety of groups, creating opportunities for donations, inspiring people to volunteer, and publicizing its successes and achievements.

The more rapport you have with the staff, teachers, the more chances you’ll have to advocate for the kids, and the more likely that teens will be given chances to go to the bookshelves in their units, as well as to the library itself. It’s necessary to make sure that the staff and teachers buy into the library, the books, and the value of literacy. One way to do this is to involve them—find out what they would like to see in the library, what materials would enhance their teaching and their work with the youth, what authors might have a larger impact on the teens in their classes and units.

It’s important that everyone knows who you are, so get out of the library, and visit the units, talk to the staff, teachers, administration, and to the teens themselves. Tell them about the library, and about books. When they can’t come to the library for some reason, you can take the library to them. Let them see your excitement about books, books about a world they can recog-

nize. Then, when they are allowed to visit the library, there will be a familiar face, and perhaps, even some familiar books. It's also important to help teachers and staff see that visiting the library is important, so their students can see all the books they can choose from, and the different genres and topics they can read about. Even seeing the outside world through the library windows can be a positive experience. It's a safe place, neutral ground, not a place for turf disputes.

All organizations have factions, and you need to be able to work with them. Cheney explains that she makes her mission and role very clear. "I am here to support the youth in enhancing their lives. That is the purpose of the library—to show them that they have options in life. Deal equitably with everyone, and give them respect. It will be returned. That being said, it's also important to stand up for yourself and your program. You are offering a valuable and life-changing service, and defending it can help others understand its value."

### How to Start a "Write to Read" Program in Your Facility

When starting to put into place a literacy program bringing authors into juvenile detention centers, such as Write to Read, start with noncontroversial speakers that are likely to be familiar to the staff and administration. "I didn't start with Tookie Williams on a cell phone from Death Row," Cheney laughs. "I was lucky, Terry Mc-Millan lives in the Bay Area, so I just called and asked if she'd be willing to come and talk to the kids, and she was. It's gone on from there."

Working with a bookstore and a speaker's bureau will be valuable in locating authors and providing copies of the books for the kids to read before and after the authors' presentations. Connecting with

publishers keeps you current on important authors and their titles, and may result in donated books. The ability to work with bureaucracy is essential. You have to know who to contact about supplying the funds for travel, room and board, and books. Some authors are willing to cover their own costs, because they know the importance of what they are doing, and the impact they will have on their audiences, but not all are willing or able to do this.

Prepare everything ahead of time, the space, the author, the youth. The space may not be ideal, so work with what you have—be creative. The authors need to know how many different groups they will be speaking to, and how they will be likely to react. It's also helpful to let authors know that some of their audience has read their book or books, and will have questions for them. The youth need to know what's expected of them and what to expect from the author. Making sure everyone is prepared will help ensure that the event is a positive experience for everyone.

Cheney's Write to Read Project has won national and local awards, including the 2006 Coming Up Taller Award, granted by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, recognizing that it is an exemplary national model of serving the literacy needs of incarcerated youth. Cheney was also recognized as one of *Library Journal's* Movers and Shakers for 2006.

Two years later, as she looks into the future, she wishes for funding to bring in the Project CRISIS male accountability program to work with the boys. It's made up of a group of San Quentin ex-offenders, released from life sentences after more than twenty-three years of incarceration because they have graduated from the Inspire Prison Project, an extremely effective in-prison rehabilitation program. These men teach anger management, integrity, the value of telling the truth, taking responsibility for yourself and your actions, and valuing yourself. According to the California Youth

Authority, graduates of the program show a 56 percent reduction in major and minor offenses, while 70 percent of those who don't participate do reoffend. "If only we could get to these boys before they got involved in the adult prison system, imagine how many lives could be changed," Cheney says.

"What's most important in this job? Finding a way to get it done. Thinking outside the box. Don't accept 'you can't'—find a way. Say 'Yes, I can. It's something that needs to be done, and I'm going to do it.' A center administrator recently thanked Amy for her persistence in advocating for youth. He said, 'this is a great thing you're doing, and if you hadn't come knocking on my door every day, wanting to do it, it would never have happened.' You also need to go beyond the knowledge you have as a librarian, and learn as much as you can about the culture of incarceration—restorative justice classes, working with abused youth, and the psychology of adolescents. Take African American or Latino literature courses at your local college. And don't forget to learn about picture books and middle school readers that might work for this population."

### The Library

At first glance, to an outsider more familiar with public libraries, rather than prison libraries, this one doesn't seem to be in a well-appointed space. But Cheney explains that it's the best room in the facility, and the only room with windows that actually see more outside than just sky, so when youth come in, they are able to see a real landscape including trees, buildings, and an expanse of (usually) blue sky. It's a mark of how valued the library is, and of the accolades it has gotten.

The room is a small classroom-sized

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instructional practices, a school won't see improvement. Developing a learning specialist community is necessary, and they describe the challenges that such a community would face. The section on instructional design gives a detailed view of how to look at the nature of the learning, how to challenge students, and how to collaborate in order to create effective instructional design. The final chapter focuses on assessment: what it is, why it is significant, how it should be used,

and how to collaborate on assessments. The book concludes with a section for school librarians that looks to the future. Packed with cutting-edge research (rarely was a source cited older than 2000), pertinent examples, and a winning writing style, this book is sure to be a hit with *all* of its intended audience. Highly recommended.—C. D. McLean, *Library Department Chair and Upper Division Librarian at Berkeley Preparatory School, Tampa, Fla.* **YALS**

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room, with bookshelf-lined walls, tables piled with books, and those wide windows that frame the outside world beyond a concertina of barbed wire. The youth that use it are just like many of the ones on the other side of that barbed wire, but their mistakes have been criminalized, and are dealt with by the justice system, rather than the families or caregivers who deal with youth on the outside, where running away, or not doing chores or homework, or breaking the rules most teens have to live with, aren't crimes. Once these youth are wards of the state, all of that changes. But at the center, they have a chance to stop and reconsider their paths. They get a chance to change their lives, to connect with the world in ways they've never been able to, to express themselves and their needs and wants, to ask for help and get it, and use that help to make changes in their

minds, hearts, and lives. And some of them don't stop there—like Sophia, they return to give back, to help pull others out of the mire of their lives, and show them how to grow, show them how to succeed.

It's not just about the library and it's not just about the books. For Cheney, and the staff and administration she works with, it's all about the youth. "I learn daily from these guys. How to serve a multicultural community, or a population not otherwise served. How to bring the library to life for them, how to make sure that they think that the library and books are cool, and that they all get what they want and need to read. They're delightful and hilarious. They help keep me entertained and connected. I can't imagine not being here."

**YALS**

## Guidelines for Authors

*Young Adult Library Services* is the official publication of the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association. *Young Adult Library Services* is a vehicle for continuing education of librarians working with young adults (ages twelve through eighteen) that showcases current research and prac-

tice relating to teen services and spotlights significant activities and programs of the division.

For submission and author guidelines, please visit [www.ala.org/yalsa](http://www.ala.org/yalsa) and click on "Publications."

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