

East Bonner County Library Expands Resources for Juvenile Detention Center Thanks to Wal-Mart Grant

The East Bonner County Library District and the Bonner County Juvenile Detention Center (BCJDC) might seem unlikely partners, but they were united by a \$10,000 Wal-Mart grant in 2009. The BCJDC houses male and female juvenile offenders ages 10 through 17. Every year approximately 200 inmates spend time in the Center. Some inmates stay for a day or two and others remain for several weeks. In 2008 the Center booked 196 juveniles for a total of 372 bookings, demonstrating a recidivism rate of almost 41 percent.



Working with the BCJDC and its juvenile detainees allowed the library access to an underserved and “invisible” population. They firmly believed that this partnership had the potential to change lives. As youth services

librarian Suzanne Davis stated, “The public library provides a door to worlds that are limited only by a person’s imagination. We want to give the detainees a glimpse of what waits for them in they give themselves a chance.”

While detained, the students receive school instruction from teacher Lori Stone who has worked at BCJDC for over six years. She instructs students in all academic classes but had extremely limited resources available. The Center had a set of 1950 World Book encyclopedias (missing volume M) for writing reports and unfortunately access to educational and informational websites was extremely restricted due to past Internet abuses by students. Additionally, they had only two bookshelves of outdated books that did nothing to inspire kids to read. Circulation records showed that only 10-15 percent of the 350 paperbacks were being checked out while the remainder gathered dust on the shelves. BCJDC was also in need of resources to teach job skills, communication skills, anger management, and career planning.

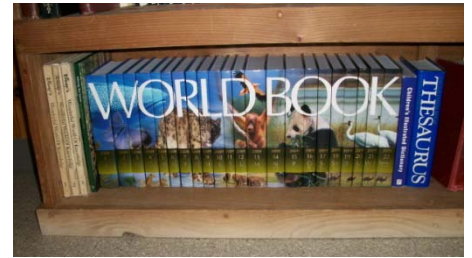


Davis met with BCJDC Manager Jim Martin and Ms. Stone to develop a multi-faceted project to address the Center’s needs. A major part of the project was the creation of an up-to-date library for the detainees. They purchased several hundred paperback books for the collection including biographies, hobby books, comics and how-to books. They paid the greatest attention to creating a current and diverse fiction collection. Davis took the lead in purchasing the first set of books, but actively sought input from both Stone and her students as she completed the collection. Once detainees saw

the first books purchased “requests for titles, series, and authors began pouring in,” Davis said. One detainee stated, “If we’d had so many good books the entire time I had been here, I wouldn’t have been so bored.” During one three-week period, seven detainees read 55 books and these included books read for pleasure as well as for book reports for school.

An audiobook collection, curriculum materials, and a set of World Book Encyclopedias were also purchased for the BCJDC library with the Wal-Mart funds. The curriculum materials included resources on anger management, career education, drug and alcohol education, as well as more conventional titles covering social studies and English. Educational DVDs and three Nook readers were added to the library’s collection, along with a new CD and DVD player so that the resources could be more readily utilized.

The second major part of their project was sponsoring a diverse speaker series. The series consisted of three parts. The first series was a four-part presentation by Davis. Two of her presentations were strictly book talks, the third introduced the various library resources available to the community and discussed how to obtain a library card, and the final presentation focused on the Career Information Services (CIS) database. Davis used the database to show them how to research new careers, investigate training and educational programs, and write resumes.



The next series featured local guest speakers during the summer of 2009. Topics ranged from summer recreation opportunities and financial literacy to the dangers of methamphetamines and empathy skills training – complete with certificates. While a formal survey was not completed, the detainees expressed appreciation and enjoyment on these presentations after each session.

The final component of the speaker series featured visitations from six writers. Local book author Sandy Compton talked with students about his book *The Hungry Now*. Nationally known speaker, author, and American Indian storyteller Jesse Bruchec told American Indian tales, played the flute and talked about various American Indian traditions. Other speakers included reporter Ralph Bartholdt, publisher Trish Gannon, and author Jane Fritz. Perhaps the presentation from Susan Swan Hobbs, a local publisher, touched the detainees most deeply. She shared her life story—which contained elements that many of the detainees deal with in their own lives—and showed how she was able to learn from a difficult and challenging childhood and create a purpose-filled life.

A final component of the project was to purchase 100 copies of *Touching Spirit Bear*, by Ben Mikaelson. This book tells the story of a juvenile offender who has severely injured another student in his town and is banished for a year to an uninhabited island. The book covers his journey from an offender to a caring human being. Every detainee who finishes his or her time at BCJDC receives a copy of the book to take home. The hope is that this book will inspire some of the students to work on and seek help for their anger issues.

The library's primary outcomes for the project were to increase reading skills, provide educational and reference materials to assist with school requirements, and provide career materials and other opportunities that offered a glimpse of a brighter future. The library feels confident that they have met these goals and continue to positively impact BDJDC detainees. They documented 30 struggling readers who used the audiobooks, completed school reports, and fulfilled class assignments. Circulation records show the paperback collection is heavily used and partner surveys revealed a conviction that student literacy skills have increased. They have clearly increased the number of educational and reference materials for the detainees to use for schoolwork and estimates show 80 percent of the students have used the encyclopedias.

Their final proposed outcome is the most difficult to evaluate, but was the most rewarding according to all involved. Letters sent to Swan Hobbs were most illuminating. The effect of her presentation was inspirational to many of the detainees. One student wrote, "I kind of grew up in the same way you did...hearing you just talk about it without no problem made me wonder if I could do the same..." and another student noted, "Your words of wisdom inspired me to really think about writing more stuff down, especially when I have a problem....because paper is the best listener in the world. It can't criticize you when you write something down...it will help even it's only a little, every little bit helps."