



STORYBOOK PROJECT



The Honorable Marielsa A. Bernard
Circuit Court for Montgomery County, MD
50 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850
240-777-9366
mbernard@mcccourt.com

How did this Project get started?

The originator of the “Storybook Project” was Companions, Journeying Together, Inc., working out of the Cook County Jail in Chicago, Illinois. In 1998, the Lutheran Social Services of Illinois established a similar program at the Logan Correctional Center in Lincoln. In 2000, Teaching Tolerance, a magazine published by a branch of the Southern Poverty Law Center, featured an article about another “Storybook Project” started in Alabama by an organization titled Aid to Inmate Mothers. The Alabama project was modeled after the two Illinois storybook projects. The Teaching Tolerance article, as well as contact with the Illinois programs, served as the impetus for the Maryland Chapter’s National Association of Women Judges Storybook Project, which began at the Jessup Correctional Institution for Women (hereinafter “Jessup”) in 2001. All of the storybook projects share a common goal: attempting to offset the damage that can be caused by a prolonged separation between mother and child. The deceptively simple act of maintaining an everyday ritual, reading to a child, in the long run can go far towards maintaining the bond between an incarcerated parent and their offspring.

To date, the Maryland NAWJ Storybook Project has helped over 1,000 inmate mothers maintain contact with their children.

Why is this project important?

An August 2008 Special Report issued by the Bureau of Justice Statistics titled “Parents in Prison and their Minor Children” indicates that since 1991, the number of children with a mother in prison has more than doubled, up 131 %. Approximately 75 % of incarcerated women are

mothers, and two-thirds have children under age 18. Gilliard, D., & Beck, A. (1998, August) Prisoners in 1997. *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice. Incarcerated mothers are often the sole caregivers for their children and as such their role in the child's development is especially important. The impact of a mother's incarceration can be devastating, with long-term effects. Imprisonment of their mother exposes children to emotional, social and economic stresses. Half of children with incarcerated mothers never visit their mothers in prison, while the other half visit infrequently. (CWLA Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners.) Many children experience shame about what has happened, become fearful and anxious, or feel abandoned. In addition to the separation from their mother, different people may care for individual siblings, with little or no contact with each other. All of these disruptions lead to an increased risk for poor academic performance, truancy and dropping out of school, drug abuse and delinquency. Children of incarcerated mothers exhibit developmental difficulties with respect to trust and bonding, the ability to get along with others, and with relationships to authority. Reed, D. and Reed, E., "Children of Incarcerated Parents," *Social Justice* (Fall 1997) 10. Such children are six to ten times more likely to end up in prison. New York Amsterdam News (Jones, D. (2006). *Saving the Children of Prisoners*. New York Amsterdam News, Vol. 97 (19), 5-5. Meanwhile, inmate mothers must struggle with the additional knowledge that not only have they lost their freedom, they have also lost the ability to interact with their children on a daily basis.

How to get started with your own Storybook Project

Some of the following information about storybook projects, especially the recording protocol, is borrowed liberally and with permission from a “how to” brochure published by Lutheran Social Services. Obviously, the first thing that needs to be done to start a Storybook Project is to contact your local prison. Once you have received the directive from the prison to initiate the project, the process is relatively simple: collect new books, bring them and a digital voice recorder into the prison, and help the inmate mothers read stories to their kids.

While previously the Maryland NAWJ Storybook Project bought Fisher Price tape recorders and Walkman cassette players to send to the children along with their books, we discontinued this practice in 2008, since tape recorders are rapidly becoming obsolete. Our Project has been fortunate in that the Montgomery County Circuit Court agreed to have its Technical Services Office transcribe the recordings from the digital voice recorders onto CDs which it donates as well. The Technical Services Office puts the name of the child and the name of the book that was read by the inmate mother on the label. Once you have that CD, all you have to do is mail the books and the CD recording to the children.

As simple as it is, this is a most important project. The children can turn on their CD player and hear their mom’s voice whenever they feel lonely or sad. They can play the CD over and over and each time hear their mom read the story and say, “I miss you. I love you.” It never gets old. It’s the next best thing to having their mother right there with them.

This is a natural project for women judges, since a judge is already part of a respected group, trusted enough by a warden to be allowed to bring

books and CDs and digital recorders into a prison and to work with the women. It can be a short-term project, perhaps working with the women at the local county jail in the months before Christmas or Mother's Day, or a long-term project similar to what we have at the Jessup Institute for Women. In Maryland, while I initiated and remain the primary coordinator of the Storybook Project, there are several volunteers from the Montgomery County Women's Bar Association who have worked on the Project from the very beginning. In the last two years we have also had volunteers from the American University Law School, where my daughter is a third year student. Volunteers are essential, especially for the fundraising portion of the project which I will discuss later in this report.

It is also important for the success of a Storybook Project to develop a good relationship with the Volunteer Activities Coordinator (VAC) at any prison. The VAC will maintain the list of the inmate mothers who want to participate, keep track of inmates who have already participated in the project, as well make sure that a participating mother does not have a "no contact" provision in regard to her children as part of her sentence. Our first VAC, Hannah Coates, was instrumental in the development of this project, and the Maryland Storybook Project owes her a huge debt of gratitude. Ms. Coates pointed out that many grandmothers have had primary custody of their grandchildren prior to their incarceration and the Storybook Project has always included grandmothers who fall into this category. As such, the term "mother" hereafter also may include both grandmothers.

Ms. Coates also recommended imposing a requirement that any mother who wished to participate must first successfully complete a parenting class. The implementation of this requirement serves to help a mother reintegrate with her children upon her release, and hopefully gives

her tools to help her children both break the cycle of incarceration, as well as raise low literacy skills. While at Jessup the parenting course is a prerequisite to participation in the Maryland NAWJ Storybook Project, other prison programs offer a storybook project as part of a literacy class. How it is implemented will depend on what you decide with your volunteers as well as with your local prison/jail authorities.

Prior to going to a prison for the recordings, it is important to receive from the prison a list of pertinent regulations, including dress code information, to share with your volunteers to avoid any potential difficulties. It is important to remember to always follow the jail/prison rules, no matter how much you may question them. Jessup originally would not allow us to wear blue jeans or sneakers. Everything you might be able to do at the jail through a Storybook Project depends on a good relationship, not only with the VAC, but also with the prison warden and other officials. Make sure to tell your volunteers that they should lock their purses in their cars, and only bring with them into the prison their IDs and their keys. Prison officials, upon their entrance into the prison, will most likely hold the keys of volunteers, which are potential weapons, until they are ready to leave. At Jessup we are issued a Jessup volunteer ID to wear while we are with the inmates. Since I do not take my cell phone into the prison, I always make sure that my family has the contact information of the prison in the event of an emergency.

The Maryland NAWJ Storybook Project tries to go to Jessup every two to three months. The VAC will usually give me a list of acceptable Saturdays. I find volunteers for one or more of the days and let Jessup know when we are coming. The VAC will then identify mothers who are eligible to participate in the upcoming recordings. The VAC will make a list of each

inmate's name and prison number, with the name of the book(s) read, the names and ages of the children, and the caregiver's name, address and telephone number where the book and CD will be mailed. This form is important for your project both for statistical purposes as well as for documentation for grant requests, etc. In the event that a package is returned, you can also use the form to double-check the child's name, the address where the child lives, etc. I also like to keep the name of the volunteer who recorded the mother in the event that there are any questions about the recordation.

Our current VAC, Alice Gordon, ensures that the mothers receive their book(s) several weeks prior to the actual recording so that they can practice reading. Our project has had an inmate volunteer in addition to the VAC, and it is helpful if one or the other can sort the books according to age level. I have found that often a mother will think of her child at the age he or she was when she was incarcerated, and will thus want to read an inappropriate book (i.e., a picture book for a nine year old). A teacher/volunteer/VAC, who is aware of the age of the inmate's children, will hopefully assist in directing a mother towards a more age-appropriate book. It is also important to emphasize to the VAC that the mothers should be encouraged to practice reading the book, putting emphasis into their reading though their intonation, pauses, etc., just as if their child was sitting on their lap. If a mother has multiple children of different ages who perhaps would not enjoy reading the same book, our Project has decided that the mother would be able to read a separate book for the older or younger child as well. We also have often had the situation where various children are divided amongst relatives and friends, and in that case the mother has read a book for each individual child and the Project has sent the book and tape to

each respective placement. Please note that if the book is for an older child, we encourage the mother to read the first chapter and then to ask her child to finish reading the book and to write to her so that they can discuss the book. The Jessup VAC will also ensure that prior to the recording each mother receives a large manila envelope that has the preprinted prison return address on top of which the mother will write her name and prison number. She will also write the mailing address, starting with the child's name, c/o the caretaker, and the address where the child is living, on the envelope. The mother will bring the envelope to the recording along with her book. At the end of the recording, it is then easy for the volunteer to put the book and CD into the proper envelope and it is ready to mail. I have attached a copy of a sample participation form from Jessup. Once a mother has participated, she is not eligible to read again until the waiting list has been extinguished and her name comes back up.

Recording with the mother:

It is important to go over with your volunteers the protocol of the reading and recording period AND to emphasize that you are there simply to facilitate with the reading and recording. No personal information should be given by you or by the volunteer to the inmate mother other than your first name. However, the Jessup inmates somehow know that I am a judge and that the other volunteers have legal careers, but as of yet we have never had any conflicts in terms of people I have sentenced, clients that the attorneys have represented, etc. If that did happen, we would just switch the inmate to another volunteer – usually we have at least two and optimally three volunteers that go on any given day since we generally have at least thirty inmate mothers to record.

At Jessup the parent is permitted to start the reading by greeting the child or children by name, saying this is Mommy and telling them the name of the book that they are going to read. The inmate mother is also able to talk to the child briefly at the end of the reading, telling the child for example that they hope they like the story, that they are always thinking of the child, that they love the child and miss him or her. They can also add a word of thanks to the caregiver or admonish their child to follow what the caregiver says – just be careful that nothing inappropriate is said. Ms. Coates always cautioned us in the beginning of the Storybook Project to avoid any language that appears to be code. Volunteers should be ready with tissues since often the mother will get emotional, especially at the end of the recording. Be ready to encourage them if they feel that they cannot read well or that they are self conscious. We usually reassure them that the recording can be paused if necessary (this was easier with cassette recorders – the digital recorder is harder to control!). The mothers will often want to talk to you about their children, their ages, how they miss them, etc., and you can fulfill an important role by listening to their story. At Jessup the mother is also allowed to write a short personal message in the book, and again the volunteer needs to advise the mother, which the VAC should already have done as well, that the writing is simply an expression of the mother’s love and concern for her child or children. I try to check the writing in an unobtrusive fashion and to date have never had a problem.

Books:

Gathering the books, tapes and digital recorders that you need for the project is a wonderful opportunity to educate the general public about the many children who have parents in prison. The Maryland NAWJ Storybook Project has been fortunate in entering into a partnership with Scholastic Books, which supplies us with approximately 100 books every six months. We try to ensure that we have multicultural books for all ages from 1 to 14, and because these books will be mailed, we encourage paperback books rather than heavier bound ones. We do require new books for the children since the Project simply acts as an intermediary and the children believe that the books come directly from their mother. The books and the CD may be the only gifts children will receive from their mother while she is incarcerated, and our group decided that it was important for the children to receive a nice present from their mother. This helps to reinforce the feeling that their mother loves and remembers them. As such, we do not accept any donations of used books. Women's groups, fraternal organizations, Scout groups and older children in schools or church groups can be encouraged to either buy new books or to donate funds to purchase them. Many books are appropriate for all children, regardless of their age. Dr. Seuss and *The Little Engine that Could* are examples. However, since many of the children of imprisoned parents live in poverty, it is important to avoid books that are focused on middle class suburban themes. There are excellent multicultural books such as *Corduroy* and *The Snowy Day* that parents would be delighted to read to their children. Children who donate books should be encouraged to find books that they themselves would enjoy. They can also often get them from book clubs at school. Books cannot have stickers or other "extras" if they are to be allowed into prison. Also please note that

sometimes the inmate mothers may ask a volunteer to mail candy or other small items with the books and CD, which is usually against prison regulations, so one must be very careful in accepting anything for mailing from the mothers! It is also important to get some baby books with cardboard covers for very young children. I have attached a sample list of multicultural books that have been popular both with the children and their mothers.

Besides the books and the CDs, you will only need padded mailing envelopes and the cost of postage. In Maryland, Jessup provides the envelopes, and one of the volunteers from the Women's Bar approached a local mailing company and worked out an agreement with the company for reduced postage/shipping costs. Since the mailing costs can add up, I would recommend that you ask the jail if they can absorb these costs, and if not, try to find an organization that will either donate these services or offer them at a reduced rate. As word about your project spreads, people will want to help make it successful. I have often been contacted by public defenders, criminal defense attorneys, as well as probation officers who wish to donate to the project, and I direct them to NAWJ. On the converse side, be prepared as well for people, especially members of the general public, to challenge your project on the basis that the inmate mothers should not be helped. I have found that you can reach out to these people by emphasizing that we are primarily trying to help the children, and to help break the cycle of incarceration.

Fundraising:

The Maryland Storybook Project has two primary fundraisers which we try to hold every year. The first is a Mother's Day Project, which

involves sending out an email reminding people that Mother's Day is approaching, and asking them to make a donation in the name of their mother, sister, aunt, friend, etc. – any woman who they would like to honor on Mother's Day. Upon receipt of the donation, a volunteer member of the Storybook Project will send out a lovely Mother's Day card stating that a donation has been made in her name as well as information outlining our project. We have recently received requests to send out birthday cards as well, and we have expanded our initiative to include other significant dates. This email is sent out to the different bar associations in our county, as well as to all of the friends, colleagues and family of the committee members. We also send it to probation officers, state's attorneys, our local Commission for Women, etc.

We have also partnered with Barnes and Noble in designating a "Storybook Week" which we hold every year in May/June at the end of the school year, when people are buying books for their children's summer reading requirements. We kick off the week with an author's book signing event, and then do mass emails asking people to buy books at the store and to ask that their purchases be earmarked for the Maryland NAWJ Storybook Project. By doing so, our Project gets a percentage of the purchases. We also have a box that we decorate with information about our Project and pictures of mothers reading, etc., that is kept by the register for donations of new books. Barnes and Noble also permits us to set up an easel in the children's book area outlining our project and encouraging people to "buy a book for your child, and at the same time, donate one for the Storybook Project!" I have attached a sample copy of the email for the Mother's Day Project as well as a copy of the annual fundraiser card giving information about the Barnes and Noble event. The volunteer attorneys are very helpful

in terms of sending requests for donations to law firms, community organizations, etc. The more informed your community is about your project, the more it will support it!

At the very beginning of our Project, we were fortunate to have an article about our program appear in the Washington Post, a copy of which is attached for your review. NAWJ received several donations as a result of this publicity. Our next recording at the end of September 2008 is also going to be the subject of a news report for a Baltimore television station. We have periodically distributed press releases and other information about the Maryland Storybook Project giving updates about our progress, and in May 2008 we were the beneficiaries of a large donation from a law firm that wanted to mark its anniversary in a more meaningful fashion than throwing a party. Several 4th and 5th grade classes have also made the Maryland Storybook Project the beneficiary of book drives and other charitable endeavors.

I wanted to share with you some of the comments that we have gotten over the years from the mothers about the impact of our project:

“I would like to say that this project has opened a door of communication for me and my child – my daughter loves her book and tape – she plays it over and over.”

“Through the Storybook Project we can express our love to them and give our children the love of us being there with them and sharing something together.”

“My son runs around the house with his headphones and book, finding somewhere new to sit and listen, and to anyone within earshot, he joyously exclaims, ‘My mommy’s on here!’”.

This is an undertaking that may be difficult at first, especially when you are confronted with the emotions the mothers express at the end of the recording when they say goodbye to their children. It will certainly make you feel thankful that you are free to return to your own family, and it may bring a feeling of fulfillment when you picture the children's happy faces upon opening their package and seeing a gift just for them from their mother.