**Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone: Bringing Family-Based Literacy to Local Prisons and Under-Served Communities**

**Presenter: Carla Veitch, Children’s Programmer, Gravenhurst Public Library**

This is quite a surprise for me to be standing up here doing a presentation at the OLA Super Conference in Toronto. Not that it’s a big deal to be in Toronto but I find it very interesting as I get older to follow the path where my life experiences lead me.

So here I am a presenter, totally inexperienced in this role but grateful for the opportunity to share something I am passionate about outside my role as a Children’s Programmer at the Gravenhurst Public Library.

I am a strong believer that our early years as children play a very important role and actually impact our lives as adults.

I grew up in a family of caring adults with a large church focus and a very generous, giving constitution. There was always an open door and often open wallet policy in my home.

Being immigrants from Europe in the 50’s both my parents and maternal grandparents were very open to helping whomever they could, however they could and wherever they could. My grandfather, from Germany never did get his driver’s license in Canada yet commuted by bus all over the city and its outskirts to visit men in prison.

My first memory of being in a prison was around the age of 9 when my grandfather and I went to visit one of his contacts in the Penetang Penitentiary. An unheard of Saturday outing in this day and age but apparently it was a possibility in the 60’s. We went round trip on a Grey Coach Bus from Toronto to the prison in Penetang. I can remember sitting on a wooden bench, long braids, a hand sewn cotton dress, and waiting patiently as my grandfather had a visit with his contact. A strange childhood memory but one that clearly opened my heart and awareness of that often forgotten and sadly shunned group in our communities.

Fast forward 40 years and I find myself living in a community with 2 Federal Correctional facilities within 10 minutes of my home still very much unaware of the opportunities that wait behind that barbed wire fence and behind those firmly locked gates.

I found myself teary eyed one winter evening about 15 years ago, pondering over an article in Homemakers magazine that was entitled “Good night I love you”. This well written article outlined what is now known as ChIRP, Children of Inmates Reading Program. A simple yet profoundly impactful program that connects incarcerated parents to their abandoned families in such a positive way through Literacy. Simply put volunteers bring books into the prison allowing the incarcerated parent to choose a book to read to their family. They then are recorded while reading the book aloud. The reading is burned to a CD and both the CD and book are mailed to the inmate’s family. Having read the article and being aware I could have the opportunity to develop this program further and because my Grandfather’s influence and experiences I brought from my childhood I quickly jumped at the chance to investigate the possibility of such a program at Beavercreek Correctional Facility in Gravenhurst. Within weeks of putting in an application to run the program I was contacted by the Warden as they were open to the idea and wanted me to facilitate it at the minimum site. I pushed forward and scrounged around for books and the rest is history. That was 15 years ago! To this day I and my trusted partner and fellow volunteer Beth (who happens to now be 86!) visit both the minimum and medium sites in Gravenhurst on a monthly basis. Over the past 15 years over 3000 books have been read and sent to families across Canada and as far away as China and Pakistan through this hugely successful and impactful program.

This initiative provides a direct connection for the child with his or her incarcerated parent. In addition to the opportunity of hearing a parent’s voice, the reading initiative underscores the value of reading and the importance of books. For a number of the participants, reading aloud to their child has not been part of their pattern of parenting, nor was it modelled for them as part of their early childhood years.

Up until 2018 this program was self-funded with the help of the church I attend in Gravenhurst. I would scrounge Thrift and used book stores finding family friendly books that were in good shape so I could bring in a varied selection of books for the dads to choose from. I learned very quickly that the cost of mailing books is expensive and had to revert to only sending soft-covered books. The stories would need to be a range that could be read to children from birth to age 12. I knew that this program had great potential to connect dads with their children. Over the years Beth and I heard lots of feedback as to how much those brown envelopes that arrive each month in the mail bring such joy to these abandoned feeling children. We hear how children listen to the story over and over every day of the month until the next book arrives. We hear how moms get tired of listening to the same story for 30 days. We hear how children create their own library over the years of special books from dad or in some cases grandpa. We have some participants who have been reading for up to 6 years and their families’ special personal library now contains over 60 books!

Over the years I had always envisioned how this program might expand, with the help of a great supporter, to every Federal Institution in Canada. With little effort and the commitment of 2 dedicated volunteers at each site, I saw it as attainable. I began thinking of how else a program similar to this one could be carried out to other forgotten and overlooked families in our communities. I started to think about children whose parents or grandparents were institutionalized or hospitalized, children whose parents were serving in the military. They were always on my mind but I never had the resources and support to do anything about these ideas.

I am happy to say that as of today ChIRP is now actively running in: both Beavercreek sites in Gravenhurst, Springhill Penitentiary in Nova Scotia, Collins Bay minimum site in Kingston, as well as both the minimum and medium sites in Drumheller, Alberta. I am currently working with a contact at Millhaven Penitentiary, Dorchester Penitentiary in New Brunswick , Ontario Correctional Institution in Brampton, Bowden Institute in Alberta and just last week a call from Stony Mountain Institute in Manitoba!

I was actually tracked down early in 2018 by the founder of an organization called BCFI or Book Clubs for Inmates. This Toronto-based charity supports volunteers who hold Book Clubs in Federal Institutions across Canada and they realized that ChIRP would fit into their mandate as a charity. I am happy to say that ChIRP is now fully supported by them and I have been given the opportunity I had only dreamed of, to bring ChIRP to as many Institutions as possible across Canada.

The participants now get the benefit of reading current, brand new, mostly hard-covered books to their families. The books are now provided by First Book Canada another charity that provides quality books and resources for free distribution to programs across Canada. Their mission statement:

“First Books believes a child’s education is their way out of poverty. We work with educators and partners to identify and remove the barriers to learning and resources, creating equal access to quality education, and transforming the lives of kids in need”.

So I now have that great supporter that I had only ever dreamed about!

The Elisabeth Fry society of Greater Vancouver has published a very useful guide entitled “Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents”. This guide is designed to help communities take a leadership role in supporting at–risk children to experience more stable childhoods, meet their developmental milestones and build the skills needed to enjoy brighter futures as active members of society. The guide itself is very useful in helping us understand the trauma and stress that is associated with a parent’s incarceration.

Figures taken from a research document by Lloyd Withers and Jean Folson, May 2007 for Canadian Families and Correction and Corrections Network and Correctional Service of Canada show that there are 357,604 children affected by parental incarceration. We would assume that number is somewhat higher now with the estimate at 450,000 or approximately 4.6% of the total population of Canadian children.

Due to the combination of the stress and trauma caused by parental incarceration these children are statistically more likely than any other group to one day come into conflict with the law themselves. They commonly experience poverty, unstable home environments, and family members who may be homeless, have mental health issues or struggle with addiction. This does not paint a pretty picture of a normal childhood; then add the fact that mom or dad has been removed from the home and the feelings of abandonment that go along with this.

The guide reminds us that communities have the power to make a positive difference. With support it can provide immediate benefits for families and be impactful to improve children’s journeys into adulthood.

I can only imagine the stress and disruption in the lives of these vulnerable children. In my mind, I picture a somewhat chaotic and perhaps even unsafe daily life even prior to the event that removed the parent from the home. It is not uncommon that family violence would be the reason a parent comes into conflict with the law.

I am not envisioning a picture of a healthy parent child relationship; where sitting on the couch and reading a book together is the norm. Studies show that a child needs 1000 books read to them before they themselves begin to read. For many families that is a no-brainer! You probably had that covered by the time your child was 3! Imagine a child’s delay if they had never had even one book read to them.

The ChIRP inmate reading program is changing that for these at-risk children. Reading aloud is the single most important thing a parent or caregiver can do to help a child prepare for reading and learning.

More than half the children in this country will not hear a bedtime story tonight. As book lovers we cannot imagine that.

I was shocked to hear a dad tell me he had never read out loud as he was about to read a book for the first time to his son. He hesitantly started reading and within minutes his eyes filled with tears and he began to realize how much of an impact this whole experience would have on his relationship with his son. He tearfully told me that as a child he sometimes wished that there was someone who would read to him at home. He heard his Grade 2 teacher reading Charlie and The Chocolate Factory aloud to the class and looked forward to the last 15 minutes of each day as her soothing voice kept the class mesmerized listening to Charlie’s adventures in that amazing Chocolate Factory. That memory was stuffed way down deep until he found himself sitting in this small room with me reading out loud to his young son. This happened over 4 years ago and his son now has a small library of over 40 books, each with a CD that he can hear dad’s soothing voice read to him. In the last year his son has begun a new routine of reading the book to his dad over the phone once he receives it, as he now has joined the population of enthusiastic readers.

This is just one story of the impact programs such as ChIRP that promote family Literacy and connections to this forgotten segment of our communities can have on rebuilding relationships.

The guide states: “It is a challenge for communities to recognize these forgotten or hidden children and because they fear exclusion and stigmatization they generally do not self- identify. There is no list of children of incarcerated parents. Protecting the privacy of children and families is important, and privacy protection laws and policies may make it difficult for agencies to share identifying information, even with those looking to help this group of children.”

But we know with the current figure of 450,000 every community has a group of these families hiding their life stories.

Getting into the Prison system as a volunteer is not always an easy feat but is certainly doable. You must undergo training that as you can well imagine, is quite extensive. Our Federal system also has a huge changeover of staff as people are constantly being transferred. I found that I would begin the process with one staff either a chaplain, social program director, or volunteer coordinator and suddenly they move on to somewhere else. The process I have used to get into the system has typically been through a contact from one site to a new site. It doesn’t seem possible to pick up the phone and call an Institution and present the program over the phone. I have always needed a lead from someone. Another obstacle is the fact that everyone in every job is busy and people don’t often want to take on another project. As I introduce the program I am always stressing to staff at the Institution that there is really no work other than supervising the volunteers.

I have developed a program outline that I share with my initial contact that details the program and the eligibility requirements for the inmates along with the benefit of providing family connections.

**“Reading aloud is the single most important thing a parent or care giver can do to help a child prepare for reading and learning”**

**“More than half the children in this country will not hear a bedtime story tonight”**

I am very excited to connect with you in regards to an initiative that provides an opportunity to connect incarcerated family members with their children. This is an initiative that I have personally been involved with over the past eleven years at Beaver Creek institution with the support of the chaplains in the institution.

This program connects incarcerated parents and grandparents to their children in a meaningful and positive way. At Beaver Creek, we identify this program as ChIRP (Children of Inmates Reading Program), but it is also known in other locations as Parent Child Reading Program.

The program that I have been involved with is fairly simple to operate. Two enthusiastic volunteers enter the institution monthly, at a set time and set date and operate throughout the entire year. The volunteers bring with them a selection of quality children’s books that are able to be read in a short period of time and are suitable for children ranging in age from birth to 12 years of age. Each participant who has been cleared for the program, chooses a book and then reads that book to their child, while being recorded into a digital voice recorder. The recording is then transferred onto a CD. A pocket is glued into the front of the book, the CD is placed inside the pocket and the book is then mailed to the child.

Through the generous funding of and in partnership with BCFI (Book Clubs for Inmates), I have been given the opportunity to support and assist in the implementation of parent child reading programs with CSC staff who would like to see this initiative in their institution as well as to offer support, as requested and needed, to institutions who already have a reading program in place. All costs will be covered by BCFI and I will be able to train and support volunteers as well as provide the required equipment, books and materials needed to facilitate the program.

What an incredible way to connect children with their parents during a very difficult time and assist with the strengthening of family bonds which plays such a vital role in reintegration.

Please give this program your consideration and feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience to talk about next steps in your institution.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

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I have also found it helpful to be available to recruit volunteers as needed and if possible visit the site or at the very least FaceTime with the volunteers prior to the program start up.

Once the Initial contact is made the Institution must give approval for the program. This too can take a while and I have been known to prod and poke around to get things moving. Once that approval is granted we begin to promote the program to the population at the prison. Flyers are hung on bulletin boards in common areas giving information on how you can participate in the program. The program is open to dads, step dads, grandfathers, uncles, brothers or moms etc. in the Women’s prison.

All perspective participants must fill out an application form that is then given to their Parole Officer who contacts the child’s custodian to grant approval to receive books from dad. With the signed application the dad is ready to go. Volunteers will visit the site monthly at a given time. I visit Beavercreek on the second Tuesday of each month and the Medium security site on the third Wednesday of the month.

The group is always eagerly waiting for us and they are grateful for the opportunity to be reading. Beth my partner handles the crowd control. At 86 she is very well respected by the inmates and is a great chatter. The books are spread out on a table along with the sign-up sheet of the order in which they will read. We hold the program in the chapel at Beavercreek as there is a small office for me to use to do the actual recording with a digital voice recorder. As the group appears they hover around the table choosing their book. Beth makes sure that those who need coaching read the story to her before coming into the office to be recorded. We never ever want anyone to feel excluded from the program because of poor reading skills or a language barrier. We work with that. We have even allowed books to be translated and read in their native language.

The whole process takes at least a couple of hours as each dad waits their turn to read with me. I keep a list of each participant’s book they read as I do the recordings. It’s not such a great thing to send the book off to the wrong family and it’s actually not their dad reading! Dad begins with a short message telling the child that when they hear the guitar strum it’s time to turn the page. I actually follow along and strum the guitar. This way the child can listen without a caregiver. Then at the end of the book they can give a short message saying not much more than “I hope you enjoyed the story. Good night, I Love you”.

The whole while I am doing this, Beth is in the main area of the chapel listening to the guys’ day to day stories as well as coaching if needed. We both feel very comfortable with these men, odd as that seems as many have committed crimes that we cannot even imagine. We have on our body a Personal Protection device that has an emergency button if ever required. Never has there been an incident that required assistance. These dads are so grateful for the opportunity to read these beautiful books to their families. They are all on their best behavior and are always very respectful and thankful for the time we give to come and carry out this program.

Once I am back at home I transfer each reading to a CD, glue a pocket in the front of the book and mail the book and CD to the family.

Children are never responsible for their parents’ choices. At the same time, they are the hidden victims not only in the justice and correctional system, but also within our larger community.

As I interact with these men I am fully aware that they are the ones that have made the bad choices that have forced their children to become innocent victims.

They ultimately are the ones that severed the relationships. They are the ones who now have to do the work to rebuild those relationships. I can’t imagine how hard that would be but I do know that programs such as ChIRP in some small, but impactful way can help bring healing and restoration to those hurting families and can be one helpful tool to start the long journey of re-building those broken relationships.

I hope this presentation inspired some of you to look for opportunities that you can make a difference in the lives of forgotten or shunned children in your communities. It may not be going into the prison but searching for other ways to make connections, keeping your ears open and looking out for opportunities to make a difference in the lives of these children in your communities.

May it be said of all of us:

A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was,

the sort of house I lived in or the kind of car I drove,

but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child!!