

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

The Politics and Practices of a Books to Prisoners Organization

Nyki and Books to Bars Hamilton

There is a shortage of reading material available to imprisoned people in Ontario. In many provincial jails, the library selections are small and worn. In some, libraries do not exist. In federal prisons, though libraries typically exist, most collections are old and worn, with only sporadic replenishments. The situation developed because funding for books inside both prisons and jails is minimal. Unfortunately, things seem only to be getting worse.

The book shortage came to our attention in 2007. To address it, we formed Books to Bars. We developed Books to Bars in Hamilton, Ontario as a grassroots, volunteer-run, community-centred initiative. The purpose is to bring as much reading material into Southern Ontario's prisons and jails as we can facilitate. Working from a core value of creating and strengthening support at the community level has proven successful. We are able to make regular donations to over a dozen jails and prisons, all from donated material. Donations usually consist of between 50 to 300 books, which we collect, package and deliver. Their contents are based on the rules and request of each specific jail, which vary considerably from one to another.

Donations are gathered by various efforts. Year round, books are collected through local businesses who pair with us as donation locations. The locations, usually community hubs such as coffee shops and community centres, all place donation boxes in their spaces for as long as they are comfortable, and this effort has provided us with a consistent supply of material to donate. We also engage in larger events to bring in books and to raise awareness about conditions on the inside, especially about how people do not have access to many books or access to most positive things one could do while in prison. There is nothing but benefits involved with reading and individual learning, not to mention the fact that recidivism rates are highest amongst the people with the least opportunity. So as much as it is about putting books inside prisons, Books to Bars is also about reminding folks outside that jails and prisons are not the place where bad people go to be forgotten. They are full of our community members who will return to our communities. We want them back empowered, not disenfranchised.

One of our favourite events is our annual holiday book drive, where by playing on the name "Books to Bars", we team with local bars, pubs and arts venues that, for the month of December, all collect books for the cause.

The drive ends with a benefit show at one of the involved venues. They are a great way to generate material, spread awareness, and build solidarity with arts, music and social justice oriented communities. The benefits also help to raise much needed funding for our costs.

Until late 2010, we worked almost completely out of pocket, the exception being funds raised from our benefits. Luckily, we have since registered as a non-profit and now receive support from local unions, which include OPSEU Local 240, CUPE Local 3906, Hamilton and District Labour Council (HDLC), and Hamilton-Wentworth Elementary Teachers' Local (HWETL). Most of our funding goes to shipping and delivering donations, but we are beginning to be able to support new projects. One is called *Our Time*, a program that began at the Vanier centre for women, which we support at Grand Valley, Ontario's women's federal prison. *Our Time* allows mothers to video tape themselves reading a book to send home to their children. We think *Our Time* is tremendously valuable. Many parents have no access to their children while they are imprisoned. With Grand Valley being the only women's prison in Ontario, whether a woman is from Kenora or Ottawa, she is imprisoned in Kitchener. Too many people are completely displaced from their families by prisons, and *Our Time* is helping to lessen the devastation. We are thrilled to be supporting it.

Now more than ever, the need for literature behind prison walls is growing. Not only is the number of people being imprisoned rising, but the recent federal budget has significantly reduced what little funding existed for social programs inside federal prisons, which includes funding for books and library services. Prisoner populations are rising across the province, while supportive and education-centred services are diminishing. For groups like ours, it is a huge setback. We are trying to work within a growing culture in a system that is devaluing positive opportunities for imprisoned people. We feel a great concern about the current direction of the Canadian penal system, for not just the further lack of emphasis on these services, but for the future of initiatives like ours to be able to contribute what we can. We rely on the staff of each individual prison and jail to allow our donations in. When a jail has either no interest or no budget for a book program, the likelihood of a call from a group being returned and resulting in a donation is small. We have already experienced this with several jails, who we would like to donate to, but have never been able to. That being said, in more instances than not, we encounter staff members and volunteer librarians who go out of their way to secure donations. We have had on many occasions people from the jails actually

drive to us to pick-up donations when we could not afford to ship them. The problem is that the jobs of and services provided by these individuals are being cut, and devalued, to make way for the oppressive and industrialized conditions associated with mass incarceration.

To all Books to Bars volunteers, the importance of their being rich and diverse selections of reading material inside jails and prisons cannot be overstated. We believe that no person should be denied access to reading, and that access to books are, in fact, crucial for imprisoned people. Many prisons and jails in Ontario confine people to a cell between 14 to 23 hours per day. Reading can help serve as a tool to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges that such confinement creates. No good is done by leaving a human being in a cell with nothing, halting their ability to grow and learn. Yet, this is exactly what is happening, especially in Ontario's remand centres, where people are often held untried for years.

We do what we can to put good books inside prisons and jails. There are challenges, but the benefits of the work are invaluable. We are able to contribute towards the fostering of support, growth, and solidarity, both for individuals and for communities, both inside prison walls and out. This is what we believe in. If at the end of the day one imprisoned person is able to find a moment of peace, then it has all been worth it.

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