

Giving VOICE to LOVE

By MATT ALDERTON

Carrie Pierce is reading her 8-year-old daughter a bedtime story. It's an imaginative story with an interesting plot, she says, something she thought her little girl, an avid reader who once read 70 Dr. Seuss books in one week, would enjoy. Unlike most mothers, Pierce doesn't have the luxury of reading at her daughter's bedside. She's reading into a tape recorder—from prison.

Inside a small classroom in the church at Dwight Correctional Center, 75 miles south of Chicago, is where Pierce and about 20 other convicts gather on the second Saturday of every month to take part in a program called Aunt Mary's Storybook Project. Companions Journeying Together, an interfaith prison ministry that operates out of a post office box in Western Springs, runs the program year-round at Dwight and twice a year—in connection with Christmas and Mother's Day—at Cook County Jail. With help from volunteers, the incarcerated mothers select an age-appropriate

book for each of their children and then read the books aloud on tape. They can record a personal message, as well, and often write a note inside the book. Then, the book and tape are sent home as gifts to the child, the only contact some mothers have with their children.

"It's very powerful," says Nancy Schreiber, head of the Storybook Project at Dwight. "They're often in tears."

"This is an excellent opportunity for me being here that I can still read to my daughter," Pierce says. "She can take the tapes and pop them in anytime she misses me or just wants to hear Mom's version of a story." Pierce, 29, is serving a 40-year sentence on an alcohol-related death. She sees her daughter just once a month.

"She was my little angel. She was my shadow. If I had on pink, she wanted to wear pink. If my hair was in a bun, she wanted her hair in a bun. It's been very, very difficult us being separated. But I'm still Superman in her eyes," says Pierce.

Aunt Mary

Aunt Mary's Storybook Project is named after Mary Best, a school-teacher from Brinsfield, Ill., who died in 1986 and left a healthy inheritance to her three nieces. One of them, Jana Minor, had been volunteering in prisons for 20 years. The sisters decided to use Aunt Mary's money to fund Companions as an extension of her work. The Storybook Project debuted in Chicago at Cook County Jail in 1993 as a way to give incarcerated mothers more contact with their children. Supported by grants and donations from private individuals, it has inspired similar programs in more than 20 other states.

Contact between a mother and her child is crucial, says Monica Halloran, director of Companions. It's what Aunt Mary's is all about. Last year alone the program connected 201 moms at



An inmate reads and records a story to send to her child.

Dwight with their 494 children. At Cook County, more than 600 women sent recordings to more than 1,000 children.

"Women who have men, either boyfriends or husbands, who are incarcerated continue to support those men while they're in prison," Halloran says. "The mothers support them, the grandmothers, the wives, the daughters. Most women who are incarcerated lose their support. And they feel very guilty. The children are angry at her because they don't understand what's going on. And so there's this huge rift, and a lot of times they just don't know where to start again."

The Storybook Project helps repair that rift. "The relationship building is really important and it helps the moms. I had one mom who said, 'This is the first time I've ever felt like a good mom,'" Halloran says.

More than 80 percent of the roughly 2,747 women in Illinois prisons are mothers, according to statistics collected by Chicago Legal Aid to Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM), a group that promotes the legal rights of mothers in prison. And even from behind bars, these women continue to be parents.

"Not the physical mothering, obviously, but the emotional mothering is even greater because that's all they have," says volunteer Patricia Berry,

73, of Western Springs. She's been to Dwight on five separate occasions and worked with more than 30 different women. "There are various facets to their life and there are roles that they have played, one of which needs to be punished, and they accept that. All of these women desperately want to be back with their children. One woman said to me, 'I've been here three times now. I'm getting out next week and I'm never coming back here again.' So I think there's important things to remember about these women: their desire not to be there and their desire to live a different kind of life."

Tiffany Norris says she wants just that. To live a different kind of life. Her second child, a boy, was born last August at Dwight—and taken away from her 24 hours later, in accordance with state law. In prison on drug charges, she says she's learned from her mistakes with the help of programs such as the Storybook Project.

"Each mother will make mistakes, but you get up and try it again. You learn from your mistakes. And I have learned. With Storybook, it helped me get that bond back with my kids that I didn't have, to relate with them, even though it's over a tape. Now that I can't do that personally, I can read to them, send them a tape, send them a

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One mother tries to find the perfect story.

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card, a picture, let them know I'm thinking of them and that I miss them."

Hope

The church classroom at Dwight is a sterile place with stone walls and a tiled floor. A chalkboard on one wall carries the words *woman, abuse, rejection, abandon, poor and self-esteem* written in yellow chalk.

Across the room a large woman is quietly singing "Happy Birthday" into a tape recorder. Her smile is as wide as an ocean. Her name is Melissa Flagg and she has two children, a daughter who turned 17 in February, and a son who turned 14 in March. She's served three years of a 16-year sentence for second-degree murder and is up for parole in September.

"I was always told that I was a good singer," she says, beaming with pride. "Being away from the kids has made

me realize that the most important thing is singing to them. Everybody heard how great this voice was, but the ones I love the most haven't heard my voice. It hurts. With the Storybook program, being able to sing something to them on tape just gives me hope."

Hope is a big part of what the Storybook Project is all about.

"They absolutely come alive when they're reading the stories," says Schreiber. "Most of the ones that come to Storybook have done some real soul-searching. You can see there's hope."

For the first six months of her sentence, Roseanne Compton's only contact with her two sons was through the Storybook Project. Phone calls and stamped envelopes were too expensive. "You never realize how much of your heart you've given to your kids until it's taken back. And then you know you're missing that piece. When I came here, I lost my home, my house, my everything. I don't know how much they have left of what was, so this is my way of building it back up again."

Ave Zuccarino, a mother of two from Oak Park, volunteered with Aunt Mary's at Cook County Jail for the first time in December. She compares the inmates there to the broken spirits she's seen on visits to Third World countries.

"There was a level of hopelessness that I felt there, and I don't know that

I've ever felt that before anywhere in this country," she says. The women at Cook County, a detainment facility, have no contact with their children and, because they have yet to be sentenced, are filled with an anxious uncertainty. The women Zuccarino encountered were uneducated and virtually illiterate. They stumbled over the picture books they were reading. How can they ever get a job and provide for their children, she remembers wondering, if they can't even read a newspaper? She remembers one mother in particular who was facing murder charges. She was writing her 2-year-old son a message and she couldn't spell Christmas.

"They're doomed and their children are doomed."

A bond between mothers

When Zuccarino decided to volunteer at Cook County, she wanted to see what the inside of a jail looked like. She pictured "real kind of rough-talking, rough-looking types" of women locked up in barren cells. What she found were other mothers, just like her.

"Women in prison are just like us in the sense that they want and need the same things as us," she says. "I tried to imagine not seeing my children for that many months. I could feel for them."

Berry felt the same way. She and other volunteers from her church were afraid when they first visited Dwight with the Storybook Project.

"You don't know what it's gonna be like inside a prison or what these women are gonna be like," Berry says. "But the women who come to us are so dedicated to their children, and they are so remorseful about why they are there. They wish to get out and be with their children, and it's just a very moving experience. You didn't expect women to be that way."

Another volunteer, a young mother at Berry's church, discovered a woman she was reading with at Dwight had three children exactly the same ages as her own. "When they talked about their experiences of being with these three children, the reader related, 'The only difference between you and me is the husband you chose,'" Berry says.

Sara Bucksar used to do volunteer work herself—before she was convicted of armed violence and unlawful restraint and sent to prison for 18 years. Once happy to give, she's now thankful to receive.

"This is such a blessing that the volunteers give of themselves to allow us to do this. We are so grateful for it. I never fully realized how much volunteer work affects people. The kindness that people have done for me has really touched my heart deeply."

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It's easy to give, Berry says, when the person you're helping is another mother. "Very often there's a huge connection made between the person who is reading and those of us who are listening to them read. Because they always want to talk about their children and we want to talk about ours, there's an instant bonding there between mothers."

Home for Mother's Day

If she could be home for Mother's Day, Carrie Pierce and her daughter would make purple pancakes for breakfast, a family tradition using batter made with grape jelly. Melissa Flagg would take her children to Chicago for a night on the town. Sara Bucksar would take her kids to the park for a barbecue. Roseanne Compton would go on a bike ride with her boys.

But none of these women will be home for Mother's Day. They'll be at night.

"You miss a lot of things in here," says Michelle Phillips, who's serving a 12-year sentence for armed robbery. She sees her three daughters only once a year. "You always think, 'I'm gonna be here when they go to school, or I'm gonna be here when they get their first teeth, or when they start crawling.' I miss all of that. It's real hard being a mother behind bars." It's hard on the kids, too. About



Inmates filter through books in search of a story their children will enjoy.

25,000 children in Illinois are separated from their mothers each year due to incarceration, CLAIM says. Many of them will spend years in therapy as a result.

Joanne Archibald, advocacy project director at CLAIM, spent a year in prison when her son was an infant. She knows firsthand how a program like Aunt Mary's can impact the lives of both mothers and kids. "You lose so much in that period of time." When she was in prison, she sent her son a tape on which she'd recorded lullabies, similar to the tapes recorded

with Storybook. Six years later, when she told her son the truth about her time away, he made her sing those lullabies every night for six months. "Even in the best of situations children experience a sense of loss," she says.

Critics of programs like Aunt Mary's charge that volunteers are keeping children tied to bad role models. But Halloran insists that there's nothing bad about strengthening the bond between a mother and her child.

"There are people who are worse with their kids than these women who are behind bars," she says. "They're

identifiable because they're behind bars, but there are people who have done a lot worse. It's not the totality of who you are when you make a bad decision. If you ask a child, he'd rather go back to a dysfunctional mother than not get back to his mother, because he loves her. The love overrides the practicality that she's not the best person."

"Every parent does something that's a bad example," Archibald says. "Parents run red lights, they get incorrect change and keep it. But the kids still love her, and she loves them."

Tiffany Norris gets out of prison April 30, in time to be home with her new baby boy for Mother's Day. "I'll tell any young mother it's hurtful to have to leave your kids. But I did positive things. I went to parenting classes. I do Storybook; it's positive. I had to learn the hard way." To be able to spend Mother's Day with her children, she says, will make the hardships worthwhile.

"A book and a tape," Halloran says. "It just can't be anything but good."

To learn more about Aunt Mary's Storybook Project, contact Companions Journeying Together at (708) 386-7288 or e-mail Auntstorybook@aol.com.

Matt Alderton is a former intern for Chicago Parent.

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