

BOOKS TO GROW WITH NEWSLETTER FOR NOVEMBER 2004

Hello! This month we talk with Mary Stein, Assistant Director of the East Baton Rouge Parish Library in Louisiana, who has joined with the Juvenile Detention Facility in her area to provide bibliotherapy for at-risk youth.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As the holiday season approaches, I focus on issues for interfaith families particularly relevant to Hanukkah. Look for my Christmas recommendations in the December issue, which will come out early in December!

RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR THE "DECEMBER DILEMMA" FOR JEWISH FAMILIES

- *The Burning Light*, by Betsy Ramsay, Avi Katz. Pitspopany Press, 2002. Ages 8-12. A brother and sister living in Israel travel back in time to experience the Hanukkah struggle firsthand. Exciting reading with vivid historical detail.
- *How I Saved Hanukkah*, by Amy Koss. Sagebrush Bound, 2001. Ages 8-12. A fourth-grade girl, the only Jewish child in her class, is frustrated by the contrast between her neighbors' celebration of Christmas and her family's lack of interest in Hanukkah. She's determined to bring back the joy of the holiday. A terrific story about a child's curiosity about her religious traditions.
- *Jason's Miracle: A Hanukkah Story*, by Beryl Lieff Benderly. Albert Whitman, 2000. Ages 8-12. (Available at www.awhitmanco.com.) Jason, a twelve-year old boy, is cynical about Hanukkah and feels left out of the pleasures of Christmas. But on the first night of Hanukkah, he is whisked back in time to join the struggle of the Maccabees. In vivid detail, he experiences the plight of the Jews in ancient times. Jason's realization of the true miracle of Hanukkah is believable and engaging.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY STEIN

Introduction:

Mary Stein is the Assistant Director of the East Baton Rouge Parish Library, which has just joined with the local Juvenile Detention Facility to provide bibliotherapy for at-risk youth. I read about Mary's effort and was so fascinated to learn more that I decided to call her and ask her about it.

Cheryl: Hello Mary, and welcome to the *Books to Grow With* newsletter. Let's begin by telling folks more about your library system.

Mary: East Baton Rouge Parish Library serves a population of approximately 450,000, with a book budget for teens that's simply great. We have thirteen branch libraries, each with a dedicated Teen and YA Services librarian. We do lots of school visits and other outreach activities. For example, I did over 100 presentations last year at local schools!

Cheryl: Mary, please tell us about this new partnership. How did it begin?

Mary: About a year ago, a volunteer at the Facility contacted us about the Facility's "library." We toured the Juvenile Detention Facility's library and were shocked by what we saw – severely outdated materials and ancient encyclopedias. There wasn't anything in there that would bring kids into a library.

Cheryl: What populations does the Juvenile Detention Facility serve? How long do kids stay there?

Mary: The Facility houses fifty-two kids, ages 10-17, both boys and girls, although the boys outnumber the girls. Most of the girls have been pregnant already; most by men at least ten years older than they are. The kids stay there from 18-24 days generally, since once their case comes up they're either sent to a long-term corrections facility or home to guardians. But some stay at the Facility for quite awhile. The Facility is run like a boot camp, with privileges based on behavior.

Cheryl: What did you have to do to persuade others of the value of this effort?

Mary: We met with the Juvenile Judges. I talked to them frankly about the kinds of materials I wanted to provide and about my hope that they would not restrict materials based on language or graphic violence. They told me that they were ready to try anything. One judge said, "If we reach even one child, it's worth it."

Cheryl: Please give us a picture of what that library looks like now? Would you share some of the books you've brought to it?

Mary: There are comfy chairs, a rug, and lighting of course – we use fiber optic lamps because they have no cords. We provide books like *Fireflies in the Dark* (children's art from the Holocaust), the *Orca Soundings* series (various issues), *The First Part Last* (teen parent), *Hanging on to Max* (teen parent), and *Swallowing Stones* (accidental death).

Cheryl: You shared some intriguing ways that you connect these kids with the books you provide...

Mary: I'll ask them, 'who watches CSI?' and nearly all of them raise their hands. Then I'll connect them with *Swallowing Stones*. Or I'll ask 'who watches Fear Factor?' and then I'll tell them about *The Survivor Handbook*.

In the cafeteria, no speaking is allowed. So I take that opportunity to play audio books, which means both that I have a captive audience and that kids who might have reading problems can get to hear books that might appeal to them.

Cheryl: What led to your interest in using books to help kids?

Mary: My family moved a lot when I was a child, but books were always a constant for me, as my mother was a teacher. In college, I chose between library school and becoming a music therapist, ultimately deciding on library school but retaining my interest in how you can use someone else's words to crystallize your feelings. With my own teenage son, this has become the way we can communicate about difficult issues – it creates a commonality for us.

Cheryl: What are your future plans for the library at the Facility?

Mary: My hope is that kids will come to “touch” the books on their own and that the audio books we play in the cafeteria will be an entree for follow-up to other materials. I want to show the Matron and the teachers there how to do follow-up activities. I'd like to bring in guest authors to talk with them, think about having a poetry writing workshop. We will have seven or more librarians visiting regularly, helping the staff learn how to use the materials. When kids go home, we plan to let them take any book that they're in the middle of reading, as well as provide them with information about their branch library and an application for a library card.

Cheryl: Are there topics you think deserve a good children's book but you've been unable to find?

Mary: Gambling, cutting and self-mutilation, date rape, anger, sexual abuse.

Cheryl: Concluding thoughts?

Mary: The worst we can do is put books out there that these kids will touch. The best we can do is to convince even one child that libraries are a place where they are welcome and where information and opportunities are there for them to find.

Cheryl: Mary, thank you so much for the opportunity to talk with you!

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