

WVU prison project connects inmates with reading material

FOR MORE INFORMATION, visit aprisonbookproject.wordpress.com, or email appalachianpbp@gmail.com

BY RACHEL FLUHARTY

For The Dominion Post

One prisoner wrote asking for books on "Chinese Philosophy," "The Chinese Way of Meditation," and anything on "Yoga."

"I would like to ask for a Western book," wrote another. "I am thanking you all for the past books you have sent me. They sure help me pass the time."

"Will you please send me a dictionary with a 'zillion, zillion' words in it? I am 60 years old and have been in prison 23 years, with life to go," another wrote. "But I can read even the smallest print."

The requests for dictionaries changed Zach Cromie's mind.

Cromie, a student, began volunteering with the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP) at WVU, which sends free books to inmates in an attempt to decrease recidivism, he said he had a few reservations.

"That was part of the reason I didn't expect to become seriously involved with the project, because when I start-

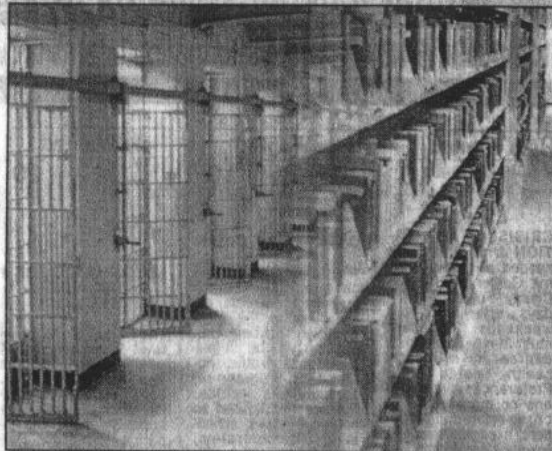
ed I didn't feel comfortable providing materials to while away the hours," he said. "I started thinking that this is a punishment, but it's also an attempt at rehabilitation. Once I started getting the letters, I got emotionally involved and it just went from there."

Cromie is now one of the longest-serving volunteers of the project. He's worked in one role or another for almost five years.

But the project got its start in 2004, in professor Katy Ryan's graduate English class on American Prison Literature.

"The students and I were studying the importance of books to people who are in prison, and I told them that as far as I knew there was not a project in West Virginia that provided free books to prisoners," Ryan said. "We did some research and found out there were none in West Virginia and very few in this region of the country. So, we carved out a six-state region that needed access to reading materials and moved our studies into the community."

Ryan said two years were spent gathering donated books, raising money for postage and finding a work-



The Dominion Post graphic

space at the Aull Center. Then, volunteers began to get the word out.

"Within a few weeks we were receiving letters from Arizona, Texas and California," Ryan said. "Word of mouth is a powerful thing. Very quickly we were inundated with letters. Right now we receive about 80 letters every week."

Prisoners participating in the project request a kind of book they would like to read, and then the volunteers try to match the request. Rules do apply, and many facilities do not permit hard-back books. Volunteers send

books directly through the mail with a small note and a request that the prisoners share the books with others. While paperback dictionaries are the most requested book, Ryan said the group especially needs westerns, books on health, history and GED preparation guides.

"The books allow the inmates to have something productive to do," said Rebekah James, WVU student, who volunteers with the project. "As one inmate who was locked up in his cell for a great majority of the day mentioned, he would either read or sleep. Read-

ing can greatly enhance knowledge, more so than sleeping. In addition, some inmates are taking college classes or courses, and used textbooks for topics such as biology can help with their studies. Mainly, I believe this program can be used as a method to offer opportunities that inmates might not have previously had."

The project has run on funds from the WVU Public Service grant, but finding money to keep the project going is a particular challenge. Mailing the books alone costs about \$4,000 a year and the project has fundraisers, such as one at the SOZO coffee shop on High Street on April 30, which featured live music and readings from the letters the project has received. Nevertheless, the year will be hard.

"Many prison book projects, there are about 25 in the country, have to stop operations temporarily or permanently because of lack of funds," Ryan said. "We have not had to do that, but this next year is going to be rough."

James said at times, she gets frustrated with the minimal resources available for funding the program.

"I have sometimes gone

down to the office to work only to find that we are completely out of wrapping paper and tape," she said. "It's truly sad to see such a great program limited by money. We are always running out of dictionaries, and it saddens me to have to put letters in a large stack of unanswered letters until more dictionaries can be purchased or donated."

The project relies on a core base of 20 volunteers who do everything from opening and logging letters and responses, grant writing, collecting books, matching books to prisoners and logging them to the post office to be mailed.

"APBP is made up of a great group of people who, for different reasons, believe that prisoners should have access to books," Ryan said. "It is a great joy for me to get to know others at the project and to do this simple thing of putting a book in the mail. The letters might speak for themselves in terms of what people get out of the books we send. Our work space is full of thank-you cards, drawings, pencil sketches. I have no doubt that every book that makes its way inside is read and reread."