

Changing Lives Through Literature in the Public Library

by Vera Fessler, Katie Strotman, and Patricia Bangs

The past quarter-century has brought enormous changes to public libraries, transforming them from stand-alone places people went to within designated buildings to resources and networks that extend throughout the community. Although we, as public library professionals, often fall into the familiar measures of what we provide directly to individuals, all that networking across our communities has actually become a two-way street. Public libraries become part of the needs, issues, and challenges in our communities. If there are solutions to community problems, we are ideally poised to add our strengths as community centers and change agents working alongside other organizations. The Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL) has been particularly fortunate to find itself in a community structure that agrees it can be a part of those solutions.

In 2007, FCPL launched Changing Lives Through Literature, an alternative sentencing program, in collaboration with the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court Services and the Virginia Department of Corrections, Probation and Parole, District 29. The program is based on a model developed by the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth in 1991, but is one of only several similar programs in the U.S. that is designed and managed by a public library. It may be one of the few such programs that targets teen offenders as well as adults.

Every library professional knows the power of literature. It is something that needs to be protected in every place and in all eras. Every dictator knows the power of books and reacts by burning them, banning them, removing them, limiting their production, restricting their distribution, and limit-

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ing publishers. Throughout the ages, enormous efforts have been exercised to control the printed word, and this is still true today. Although librarians know these things to be true, proving the positive power of literature to government leaders is a harder "sell." However, FCPL decided to attempt to show community leaders that there might be a solution to a difficult community problem through reading literature.

The Need for a Solution

In the last few decades, Fairfax County, now with more than one million residents, has experienced rapid transitions from a rural area to a "bedroom community" with a young and homogenous population, and finally to a complex

and diverse jurisdiction that faces many of the issues confronting traditional urban centers. As far back as 2005, the county's Board of Supervisors identified crime, recidivism, and the increasing activity of gangs as a growing problem for concern.

It was also apparent that the traditional follow-up of incarceration, community service, and suspended sentences for both young and adult offenders was not reversing the trend. As is true in other jurisdictions, the risk for rearrest following traditional penal practices was steadily growing. For young offenders, educational pursuits were often curtailed, eligibility for many careers ended, and family and community ties were broken. Many women offenders were young mothers; a jail sentence sets off a chain reaction of negative consequences affecting their entire families.

Like incarceration, traditional alternative sentences such as community service are not always effective, in part because court-assigned

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tasks available for offenders are generally limited to routine assignments that do not deal with the issues that led to the criminal acts.

However, wherever implemented, programs which deal with the underlying issues that lead to anti-social behavior are consistently more effective. There is a broad array of these programs, varying from intensive writing programs within prisons to residential rehabilitation programs that foster community involvement, educational progress, and social integration. In many cases, the personal insights gained provide the empowerment to choose a responsible and fulfilling life.

Enter the Public Library

Each year FCPL, like all other county agencies, reviews the annual community-wide priorities issued by the Board of Supervisors. In that process, the question becomes whether there is any role that the library can play in the solution to identified issues.

The issue of antisocial behavior is certainly not unique to Fairfax County. According to *One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections*, the Pew Center report released March 2, 2009, one in every thirty-one U.S. adults (or 7.3 million individuals) is now in the corrections system—either behind bars, on parole, or on probation—at a cost of more than \$68 billion per year. That report strongly recommends the use of inexpensive community-based programs to stem the dual rising tides of incarceration and recidivism.

Quite possibly there is no more troubling problem for any community than escalating juvenile delinquency and gang involvement. That is what motivated FCPL to propose a small pilot to implement an alternative sentencing program that had been used elsewhere, mostly with adult criminal offend-

ers and under the sponsorship of an academic or faith-based organization.

Can a public library actually lower juvenile recidivism through a challenging reading program? Get tough kids in the library? Well, why not? For FCPL, it was a matter of walking the walk. If we failed, we certainly would not be increasing the problem.

The Changing Lives Through Literature Model

We looked to Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL) as a

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model for the pilot we proposed and sent staff for training in Massachusetts. In addition to training opportunities, CLTL has also developed a wealth of resources and curricula from which to draw. Among those resources are annual seminars, evaluative studies, and books. The Massachusetts program was initiated in 1991 by a university professor and a judge when the judge lamented what he termed “turnstile justice” as he continued to see the same offenders over and over in his courtroom. Based on its success rates, the Massachusetts program is now fully funded by the commonwealth and supported throughout the state. At present, more than 5,000 men, women, and juveniles have graduated from CLTL programs and many have returned to school. CLTL has expanded to thirteen other states, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Why Changing Lives Works

Students benefit from the democratic format of the CLTL sessions that helps them realize that their own unique voices are important and learn to solve disagreements with words rather than violence. Further, by discussing characters who have histories and struggles similar to their own, offenders revisit and evaluate their own past experiences and ultimately may change their perspectives on their lives.

An early study of CLTL graduates revealed that those who complete the program are less than half as likely to reoffend as those sentenced to jail or standard probation. Further reviews conducted by individual courts confirm this pattern and show that graduates who do reoffend commit far less serious crimes and rarely commit violent crimes. As mentioned above, these statistics have motivated educators and law enforcement officials in thirteen states and England to create their own CLTL groups.

The national CLTL program adheres to four principles that are dear to library professionals:

- literature is empowering
- discussions enhance that power
- the process of reading leads to reflection
- reflection leads to change.

As designed, Changing Lives Through Literature brings together the offender, a facilitator, and a court official, sometimes a judge, for ten to twelve weekly sessions to discuss books, writing, and life experiences. The presence and participation of members of the justice establishment is critical because they also are required to fully participate. These are not therapy sessions. Participants are encouraged not to discuss personal problems or grievances. They also are not allowed to miss meetings or skip assignments. Rather, the readings are used as jumping-off points for

discussions about choices, friends, values, consequences, etc. Everyone at the table has an equal voice. Over the course of many sessions, an observer can see the group come together, open up with each other, and share solutions to what they have experienced in their lives.

The Role of the Literature

The discussions center on issue-rich literature, chosen to spark discussion, reflection, and insight. Some of the books recommended by the national Changing Lives Through Literature program for adults include *A Death in the Family* by James Agee, *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks, *Ironman* by Chris Crutcher, the poem “A Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X, and *Black and Blue* by Anna Quindlen.

Among titles chosen by FCPL for its version of the program, which includes teen and adult offender groups, are *Speak* by Laurie Anderson, *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson, *Hole in My Life* by Jack Gantos, *Articles of War* by Nick Arvin, and *Just Listen* by Sarah Dessen. All the selections share common characteristics. They offer a narrator or narrators with a strong identity or voice. They also address themes of violence, love, friendship, and family, as well as choices and consequences.

Discussions of the group’s selection are led by a paid facilitator; FCPL has relied on experienced literature instructors from a local university to lead the groups. Depending on the selection, the facilitator might pose such questions as:

- What did you think of the story?
- What was the reading experience like for you?
- Why did these people do what they did?

- Is it possible for people to change themselves?
- Why is it so hard for us to tell the truth about what we feel?

In an article in the Changing Lives Through Literature newsletter, Fairfax’s facilitator, Wendi Kaufman, explained that in a book such as *Just Listen*, a young adult book that deals with rape, the group’s most intense discussion might deal with the question “When can you say ‘No’?” She asks the class to write, sometimes rewriting important scenes in the book—an exercise that allows them to reinvent themselves. In another book, *Speak*,

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about depression, girls talk about how they hurt others because they have been hurt. Kaufman describes a domino effect as the light bulb goes on: “One girl will get it, say something trenchant about her personal experience that resonates with the girl next to her and so on down the chain.”

How It Works

To date FCPL has organized eleven ten-week sessions—two for male youth offenders, five for female youth offenders, one for women, and three for men. In the fall of 2009, we will be offering one additional session each for juvenile females, juvenile males, and men. Each session of Changing Lives Through Literature costs Fairfax County about \$3,000 plus the staff salaries for the FCPL staff and court staff that coordinate the program.

The facilitator is paid \$2,500 for ten sessions. Two books per class for twelve participants costs \$360. Supplies such as journals cost \$25. The cost for the completion ceremony is \$50. Miscellaneous printing costs for brochures, workbooks, and certificates total \$35. The funds for the 2007–2008 pilot were provided by gift funds to the Fairfax County Public Library through the Fairfax Library Foundation.

In the spring of 2009, Fairfax County was awarded a \$37,000 grant from the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) to continue the program. In addition to funding more sessions, the grant will allow staff to spread the word in order to develop a base for full and continuing support.

In Fairfax, the youth offenders are assigned to the program by the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court Services. Our early sessions focused on these youth offenders, and we have been able to assess results from those first sessions. Fifty-five youth participated in five ten-week sessions between the spring of 2007 and the fall of 2008 (four sessions for female youth offenders and one for male youth).

As you can imagine, in many cases the offenders’ literacy level or the language in which they read is a factor, so not everyone is suitable for this program. But many who are struggling are still able to be a part of CLTL. Their confidence increases as they participate with a skilled facilitator. Gaining reading competency is largely a matter of practice, so there is the side effect of improving reading and analytical skills through the program, further increasing the chances of success.

After each class ended, measures were made at specific intervals—four, eleven, fifteen, nineteen, and twenty-two months, based on when each session took place. Five participants failed to complete the program, but for the other fifty, it

was considered a successful diversion program. Five youths received new charges within six months and one received a new charge after one year.

Why It Works

The ten-week sessions are comparable to literature courses, but in the setting of the public library they become just one of many literature discussion groups. There is the open invitation for participants to consider the library as a community “sweet spot” and non-threatening place.

FCPL finds that many participants have never been within a library before, may have been intimidated by it, and probably do not have a notion of its resources—some serious and some simply intriguing to youth. The CLTL participants learn about Wii game competitions, programs by graphic novel authors, and other popular and healthy activities at some of our branches.

It is not just the location that contributes to the success of Changing Lives Through Litera-

ture. The program works because opinions are valued. Also, participants have time to reflect on literature and life experiences and to realize they are not alone in their feelings. As mentioned, everyone’s voice in the group is equal—whether participant, facilitator, or

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court official. In addition, participants have an opportunity to disagree with authority. Finally, there is safety when speaking about the characters.

Looking Forward

As mentioned above, in 2009 FCPL received a grant for public library innovation from ICMA. The purpose of the grant is fostering closer working relationships between

public libraries and the municipal executive—in our case the county executive—to solve community problems. Part of the award included national conferences with the executive and library director in joint attendance. This is resulting in a better understanding of public library potential for community impact and dialogue with other agencies.

A Final Thought

Beyond emphasizing the role of the public library in addressing community problems, the value of FCPL’s Changing Lives Through Literature program is evident in the reactions of its participants. “I feel more intelligent than ever,” a twenty-year-old male said in an evaluation at the end of one ten-week series. “My daughter realized that other girls are going through the same things she is,” the mother of a fourteen-year-old wrote. A sixteen-year-old female added, “This taught me to open up more instead of holding things in.”

Indeed, literature does have the power to transform. **VI**