Books Through Bars Turns 25!

2015 marks Books Through Bars' 25th year of sending free books to incarcerated people. John Rowland, a volunteer with Books Through Bars and the Address This! project (see pg. 3), took our quarter-century anniversary as an opportunity to look at our work in a historical context—how did we arrive here, and what hope can we have for a future without mass incarceration?

Available on the prison library's shelves were books on just about every general subject... thousands of old books. Some of them looked ancient: covers faded, old-time parchment-looking binding. Parkhurst, I've mentioned, seemed to have been principally interested in history and religion... a lot of books that you wouldn't have in general circulation. Any college library would have been lucky to get that collection... There was a sizable number of well-read inmates, especially the popular debaters. Some were said by many to be practically walking encyclopedias. They were almost celebrities. No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand.

—The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Back in 1948, in the period of prisoner “rehabilitation” before the onset of mass incarceration, Malcolm X could talk about being overwhelmed by a prison's books. At the Charlestown Prison where he was kept, there were literally “thousands of books” covering “just about every general subject” and plenty of encouragement for incarcerated folks to “read and understand.” As this description indicates, the justice system at the time encouraged literacy and self-guided education, viewing them as the mental counterpoint to physical incarceration: a way to discover the self, take stock of one's life, and develop new habits that would further one's personal transformation.

For a person inside a state prison today, though, the thought of thousands of good books laying around seems almost unimaginable. State prison libraries today have little if any public funding and are likely to hold a random selection of older books unsuitable for the prison's populations. Prisons now also hold few if any of the formal classes Malcolm X's autobiography speaks about, and there are years-long waiting lists for any job- and skill-training programs. Though people in prisons still read voraciously, there is little encouragement or incentive for readers within prisons.

This stark change between the 1940s and now is the result of two major interconnected shifts in US imprisonment that occurred: the explosion of incarceration rates and the abandonment of the idea of “rehabilitation.” Together these two changes have ensured that prisons are now overcrowded with people who have to fight to get their own books if they hope to continue their learning processes.

(continued on p. 6)
I would like to say thank you for all of the reading materials and puzzle books you have sent to me these past couple years in hole... you have kept me entertained with fiction, helped to further educate me through non-fiction, and exercised my mind with fiction, non-fiction, and puzzles....then you started the Address This! studies which I enrolled in and continue to do and learn from as well.

—R.D., incarcerated in PA

**Interview:**

**BTB Behind the Scenes**

Through its 25-year history, the work of Books Through Bars has been managed by an all-volunteer collective. Alyssa Songsiridej interviewed BTB Collective members Brielle Talarico and Keir Neuringer to hear their take on the collective and BTB's important work.

To start out, would one (or both) of you want to say a little bit about the folks on the collective, and explain how the collective works for people who may not be super familiar with BTB’s structure?

**Brielle:** Currently the collective is composed of 6 folks – Lindsay, Noam, Goda, Mee Hae, Keir, and myself. The collective is a group of dedicated volunteers that assume responsibility for BTB, sharing all of the tasks involved in running the organization. The collective does the behind-the-scenes planning, organizing, prepping, outreach, and volunteer coordination as well as working alongside the rest of the volunteer community to read letters, pick books, and ultimately get packages of books into the hands of folks on the inside. We dream up the future for BTB and draft the plans for our community to actualize it, while keeping everything on track in the day-to-day. Ultimately, we serve as the bottom line for all tasks, projects, financial decisions, and organizational development. It's awesome.

**Keir:** We operate as a non-hierarchical collective dedicated to anti-oppressive principles and we run programs that mitigate and disrupt the injustices of the criminal injustice system (specifically, around access to educational and recreational reading resources). We are truly mission driven, which is to say we exist because there is a crisis we are addressing, and our major stakeholders, who inform our work, are our book recipients.

What made you decide to join the collective, and how long had you been volunteering with BTB before?

**Brielle:** I got trained to process incoming letters, which you can do remotely and on your own time. We have an online database that every single letter has to get processed through—that's probably somewhere around 800 letters a month spread out over just a handful of volunteers. I loved doing that, but it’s a very independent task and working alongside the BTB community felt important, so when Tuesdays opened back up for me I got trained to host the same packing sessions I used to attend. Then last winter, one of BTB’s core volunteers mentioned BTB was looking for more collective members, so I met up with some collective members to see if it would be a good fit. It’s pretty much been a love story since then...

**Keir:** I got trained to process incoming letters, which you can do remotely and on your own time. We have an online database that every single letter has to get processed through—that’s probably somewhere around 800 letters a month spread out over just a handful of volunteers. I loved doing that, but it’s a very independent task and working alongside the BTB community felt important, so when Tuesdays opened back up for me I got trained to host the same packing sessions I used to attend. Then last winter, one of BTBs core volunteers mentioned BTB was looking for more collective members, so I met up with some collective members to see if it would be a good fit. It’s pretty much been a love story since then...

Could either one of you describe the main goals of the collective, and what you think are the foundational values that enable to group to work together?

**Keir:** I see Books Through Bars as operating a crisis response. The crisis is first of all the presence of the carceral state, secondly its massive expansion over the past few decades, and thirdly austerity and punitive measures applied to those affected by the first two aspects of the crisis. So not only does power protect its interests by warehousing humans, but then does it on a mass scale unheard of in human history, and then by removing even the trappings of dignity for those doing time or the communities they leave behind.

From my perspective, the goal is to get incarcerated people resources in book form to educate themselves and each other, but also to have the freedom (like those of us on the outside) to be entertained, amused, thrilled, uplifted, stimulated, provoked, and everything in between through access to all types of books and literature. The goal is to assert the fundamental humanity of people who are treated as less than by hearing them and responding to them. *(continued on p. 7)*
Address This! Seeks Support to Honor Students’ Efforts

In December of 2015, Address This! will complete its fourth consecutive year of offering social justice-focused correspondence courses to individuals incarcerated throughout the state of Pennsylvania. We are proud to say that because of an active, ongoing campaign against prison censorship of our educational materials, pursued in partnership with the Abolitionist Law Center and the Amistad Law Project, we experienced fewer confiscations this year than ever before. This means that 250 people not only enrolled in AT! classes in 2015, but nearly all of them were also fully equipped and able to participate in those classes for the duration of the semester and beyond.

There is one new initiative that Address This! wants to introduce within the next several months for which we are actively seeking your support. We’re hoping to purchase celebratory end-of-semester book copies, specifically tailored to each class, to provide to each participant who successfully completes a course (which includes responding to all six units of discussion questions). While we’ve offered a celebratory book for the past three semesters now, it has always been a single title only that was given to everyone enrolled in AT!, regardless of which class they were taking. We would like this selection to be in more direct conversation with the content of the given class, thus serving as a way for students to continue their engagement with the subject/ideas even after the class has ended. The titles that we are seeking to purchase in bulk to this end are:

- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (for Putting the ‘Us’ Back in Justice)
- *Harvest of Empire* by Juan Gonzalez (for La Lucha Sigue: Latin@ History, Culture and Contemporary Issues)
- *A People’s Art History of the United States* by Nicolas Lampert (for Paint, Print, Protest: Social Movement Art & Culture)
- *Freedom Dreams* by Robin Kelley (for Black Social Movements from Civil Rights to Hip Hop)

The book for One Hood United is still to be determined as the original title the course designers had in mind is no longer available.

If you are able to donate to this specific endeavor either by giving a monetary donation (checks can be made out to Books Through Bars, noting that it is for “AT! Book Awards” on the memo line) or by buying copies of and donating any of these titles outright, we would be quite grateful for the support. Although our aim is to start implementing this in December 2015, we will have an ongoing need for each and every one of these titles for years to come. We will be seeking publisher discounts/donations for bulk purchases, but we still estimate the initial cost for these books purchases to be about $1,000. Even though we are not an official degree-granting program of any kind, it is important to us to try to honor the work and labor of the folks inside taking these courses. You can support our efforts to do so by contributing to this book fund.

Your organization opens the learning heart and expands the confined mind, so time here can be productively and wisely used.

—E.J., incarcerated in PA
Books Through Bars hosted two massive packathon events in 2015. The first, on Valentine’s Day, helped us respond to a backlog of book requests and our volunteers assembled 500 packages in one day. This is roughly equivalent to what we send out each month.

We hosted our second packathon as a back-to-school/Labor Day weekend event. Our goal was to send out even more packages than on our Valentine’s Day event, and catch up from the few weeks we took off for our August office clean-up. We topped our previous record by nine packages.

Our hosting was split into three-hour shifts, with each pair of hosts varying the vibe with different music on the stereo and different ways of cheering on volunteers. West Philly Food Not Bombs! and a handful of others brought food and drink to share during this day-long event.

One thing to note is that we learned so much from our first event, so that even though attendance was slightly lower the second time around (apparently, packathons are for lovers, not labor day vacationers), we had a better work flow, more books on the shelves, and a cleaner environment in which to assemble packages.

At an average of 3 books per package, we sent out over 1,500 free books following our back-to-school packathon, responding to the request letters of over 500 incarcerated people whose prison libraries inadequately serve their educational and recreational reading needs.
Dynamic Coalition Launches Campaign Against Death by Incarceration

On June 6, 2015, after months of meeting and organizing, the Coalition to Abolish Death by Incarceration (CADBI) officially launched its campaign at the Vineyard Community Church in West Philadelphia. Over 300 people attended the public launch. At this moving event, community members and activists, loved ones of those in prison, formerly incarcerated people, children and families, shared delicious food, personal stories, and campaign strategies, while signing hundreds of postcards urging legislators to abolish death by incarceration (DBI), more commonly known as life without parole (LWOP).

CADBI also revealed its three core demands for legislative change:

1. **Parole eligibility for everyone after 25 years of incarceration.**
2. **Presumptive parole:** automatic release after minimum date of sentence, with the burden of proof on the State if they want to continue to incarcerate the individual.
3. **A maximum sentencing law that will stop the Commonwealth from incarcerating people for indefinite periods of time.**

Pennsylvania prisons currently hold over 5000 people serving DBI sentences. In PA, a life sentence means your natural life—it is a sentence that condemns you to die in prison. CADBI believes that death by incarceration is a violation of human rights and an affront to all of our humanity. Furthermore, DBI sentences deprive our movements and communities of the presence and contributions of those serving these sentences. Prisoners, their loved ones, our communities and movements are all negatively impacted by DBI and other harsh sentencing practices. As CADBI and Right to Redemption member Felix Rosado, who is himself serving a LWOP/DBI sentence, says, “The lifetime confinement of people who are proven by study after study to pose little to no threat to public safety is not only a cancelation of human potential but a huge waste of scarce tax dollars.”

Only one other state, Florida, holds more people in prison for life without parole than Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania is one of only six states that denies parole to all lifers. Life without parole is unconstitutional in 25 countries, and the United States is the only country in the world that sentences children to life without parole. Over 500 of the 2500 people nationally serving juvenile LWOP sentences are held in Pennsylvania, more than anywhere else in the country.

Instead of sentencing adults and children, men and women, to die in prison, PA must invest in education, healthcare, jobs, housing, and transformative forms of justice that address the root causes of violence and inequality. Over the coming months, CABDI will work to advance its demands in the legislature and in our communities, educating the broader public about this dehumanizing practice. According to David Lee, who is serving a DBI sentence at SCI Coal Township, ending DBI “will require massive amounts of organizing and education. People must understand the facts surrounding our imprisonment. People in society are fed a heavy diet of propaganda regarding how dangerous we are, and how we never deserve to be back on the outside again. We must find ways to pressure legislators into doing the right thing—not the politically expedient thing!”

This is a modified excerpt from a longer article that appeared in the Decarcerate PA newsletter, Summer 2015
Books Through Bars Turns 25!  (continued from p. 1)

The basic facts of mass incarceration are well known: from 1975 to 1985, the percentage of US citizens behind bars doubled (from 1.5 per 1000 to 3 per 1000), and then doubled again both decades from the mid-80s to the mid-2000s. In terms of pure numbers, the number of total incarcerated people jumped from 300,000 to 2.2 million between the early 1970s and today.

While these prison populations were exploding, incarcerated people were also staying jailed longer and having less opportunity for early releases. Starting in the 1970s, sentences for nearly every crime became longer under mandatory minimum laws, and most people increasingly served every day of their sentences. In the 2000s, the average incarcerated person served an average of 87-100% of his/her sentences, up from 40-70% in the 1970s.

Both Republicans and Democrats were firmly behind the “tough on crime” policies that spurred these shifts, with Bill Clinton’s 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill being the single most harmful measure in the process. Few public figures expressed dissent (out of fear of seeming “soft on crime”) and the few that spoke up for incarcerated people or their heavily policed communities met with a hostile political audience.

This same political climate also destroyed the rehabilitation model that had brought Malcolm X his books and encouraged his self-education. Throughout the ’70s, criminologists, academics, and prisons administrators pushed the view that criminals were generally too harmful and too alienated to be seriously helped. The primary role of prisons, they argued, was simply keeping incarcerated people isolated and away from the streets. This approach, widely known as the “Nothing Works” model, became dominant in the late 1970s and led to the drastic decrease in funding for libraries, skill training, and education programs. Hence, at the exact same time prison populations were expanding daily, incarcerated people were left with fewer and fewer paths to growth and education as they waited out increasingly long sentences.

Books Through Bars began in the midst of those two changes and expanded along with both of them. Starting by chance in 1990—when an incarcerated person wrote a Philadelphia-based publisher about damaged or overstock books—BTB developed quickly by word of mouth. Incarcerated people used BTB to fill some of the void the “Nothing Works” model created; by the time mass incarceration was at its height, BTB was sending out over 20,000 books per year to prisons in Pennsylvania and the mid-Atlantic area. Indeed, some of the most requested subjects are those directly relevant to incarcerated people—such as law, police and prison issues, and Black and Latino history—and those on skills and topics that were once taught at prisons before the “Nothing Works” period. As BTB’s volunteers struggled to ensure incarcerated people had the means to self-educate, they also worked to educate the public about the out-of-control growth of the prison system and the reduction of rehabilitative services that necessitated the very existence of the organization.

Over the past five years, criticism of mass incarceration has started to break through into the mainstream, and BTB volunteers plan to push it further. Michelle Alexander’s 2010 book about the mass incarceration of Black urban communities, *The New Jim Crow*, stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over a year, and a wide array of politicians (including President Obama) have spoken of the need to roll back the policies and practices of the mass incarceration era. BTB is proud to support this change, and to support our partner organizations, such as Decarcerate PA and the Human Rights Coalition, who have worked so hard to bring the issue to national attention. As strong advocates for prison literacy and education, BTB will also continue to highlight the failures of the “Nothing Works” model. As we rethink our incarceration system, we urge people to see the importance of giving incarcerated people tools to both improve their lives and, like Malcolm X, to continue to become leaders and voices of this and many other movements.
I just wanted to write and thank you for the books you just sent. It is a wonderful and caring thing that you do. When I finish reading the books I lend them to other guys on the block. So your work has far reaching effects.

— R.J., incarcerated in PA

Dollar A Day (www.dollaraday.co) is a website that features a nonprofit daily. Members contribute $1 to that day’s featured organization. Dollar A Day featured BTB twice this year, bringing in over $1,000 in donations one dollar at a time!

Right: We’d like to give a special shout-out to Amy, the wonderful mail carrier who delivers the hundreds of letters we receive weekly with a smile!

8,594 Thank Yous!

8,594 — that’s the number of book packages we sent out last fiscal year. The support of people like you made each and every package possible!

500+ volunteers — from folks who dropped by for one packing session to those who help log letters, post packages, and host volunteer sessions every week!

300+ individual financial donors. Special thanks to our sustainers, who contribute monthly!

Special thanks to the following organizations that generously supported BTB this year!

• Alpha Phi Omega at U. Penn
• Dollar-A-Day
• Germantown Friends Meeting
• Larchmont Temple
• The Yale Elizabethan Club

BTB Behind the Scenes (continued from p. 2)

Folks who write to us work for maybe 25 cents an hour. They have no money to buy books, their prison libraries are empty, or inaccessible, or full of irrelevant material, and they may not have support on the outside.

So the immediate goal is to be one aspect of the movement to stave the crisis. The longer term goal is to help people on the outside understand that this is in fact a crisis and an injustice and to involve themselves in disrupting and ending it.

As for our values: we make decisions and come to agreements through consensus, and we center our recipients in our planning and actions. We strive to use anti-oppression models of organizing and event facilitation, and to cultivate a safer space for folks to volunteer in. We also know that the language we use to talk about mass incarceration and the people ensnared by it is often at odds with the language used by politicians, the media, academics, and so forth. We try to be patient with people as they navigate this, and help them use language that asserts the humanity of the people to whom we send books.

Alyssa Songsiridej is a writer and editor living in West Philadelphia. She also teaches at the Community College of Philadelphia. She is a longtime admirer of BTB’s work.
Beginning in 2016, we ask that folks contact us at info@booksthroughbars.org or 215-727-8170 prior to donating books. Our needs are always changing and our storage space is limited. Contacting us first helps to ensure that donations match current needs and lets us arrange convenient donation times. **All donations should be in good condition and current** (5 years old or less; especially important for textbooks/educational materials). Some categories of books that we always need include:

- Paperback dictionaries
- Instructional art (how to draw, paint)
- African-American studies and radical history
- Tattoo art
- Puerto Rican history
- Urban Fiction (e.g. Teri Woods, Sister Souljah, Eric Jerome Dickey)
- Small business & Real Estate
- Trade skills (HVAC, plumbing, etc)
- Islam
- Wicca
- Puzzle books
- Erotica
- True crime

For all categories, paperback books are preferred (many prisons don’t accept hardback). We do not need: fiction that is hardback, romance novels, out-of-date texts or reference books, any books that are very old or in poor condition.

**Volunteer with Books Through Bars!**
Drop-in volunteering sessions (ages 18+) happen every Tuesday from 7:30pm-9:30pm and the 1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month from 11am-2pm at 4722 Baltimore Ave, Philadelphia. Visit our website to learn how you can get involved in other ways: http://booksthroughbars.org/volunteer/

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