Fund the Schoolhouse, Not the Jailhouse

Sergio Hyland, SCI Greene

As you probably know, schools throughout Pennsylvania are struggling with massive state budget cuts. Philadelphia public schools may be the hardest hit of all. According to Education Week, “In little more than two years, the Philadelphia school district has stripped $400 million out of its annual budget, closed 30 schools, [and] eliminated nearly 7,000 jobs.” At the same time, the state is constructing two new prisons, SCI Phoenix I and II, just miles away from Philadelphia.

Sergio Hyland, a human rights activist, participant in BTB’s Address This! program (see page 2 for details), and prisoner at SCI Greene, provided the following editorial on the links between these developments.

While students, parents, and teachers alike continue to protest the impending closings of almost two-dozen public schools in Philadelphia, a few very important issues are being overlooked. Some subtle. Others not so much. Either way, the obstacles ahead—which pose a clear and undoubtedly present danger not just to future generations of youth in Philadelphia, but also to those across the nation—must be emphasized in every form of media, and exposed in detail.

The rationale behind the looming mass shutdown is that a deficit of over 300 million dollars has crippled the state’s ability to maintain Philadelphia’s long and proud history of providing free public education to all. As a result, over 2,500 teachers, safety officials, and program instructors will be fired and replaced with, well, nothing.

It’s no coincidence that this 300 million dollar education deficit overshadows a 400 million dollar project to construct one of the world’s most technologically advanced prisons right here in Pennsylvania, capable of “housing” over 4,000 students, err, humans, err, prisoners! Even with a documented decrease in crime rates, more prisons are being constructed against the backdrop of continuous school closings. A public school to public prison pipeline has quietly been thriving over the past few decades. Though current Pennsylvania laws prohibit the state from playing host to privately-run and privately-funded prisons, (continued on p. 4)

1 www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/09/25/05techschool_ep.h33.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-TW)
The One Hood United Youth Empowerment course was designed by David Lee and Robert Saleem Holbrook, two prisoner activists within Pennsylvania’s Prison Industrial Complex who are members of the Human Rights Coalition (a human rights advocacy group in Philadelphia) and One Hood United (a youth empowerment movement). The purpose of the One Hood United Youth Empowerment course is to educate imprisoned youth into a greater understanding of their responsibility to themselves, their families and their communities, as well as to lift them out of self-destructive lifestyles by introducing them to a value system rooted in familial and communal values. The Youth Empowerment course will serve a vital need within the prison system by providing an alternative educational program to youth at a time when the prison system is cutting back on educational facilities due to overcrowding. The One Hood United Youth Empowerment course will also provide an uplifting and motivational education curriculum that seeks to empower youth, not alienate them or further marginalize them from society as the education within the prison system often does. In the words of course co-creator David Lee, “We should offer young people information that is both inspirational and able to hold their attention. The goal should be to educate, not alienate our youth. We can only accomplish such a lofty goal if we first take the time to understand them and work with them, not against them.” For more information on One Hood United contact:

David Lee #AS3041 or
Robert Holbrook #BL5140

SCI Coal Township
1 Kelley Drive
Coal Township, PA 17866

Volunteers on the Inside:
David Lee and Robert Saleem Holbrook

BTB extends our gratitude and respect to David Lee and Robert Saleem Holbrook, two incarcerated individuals who have volunteered their time to develop a new course for our Address This! correspondence course program. A description of their work is below.

New Address This! Course on Youth Empowerment

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About Address This!
Address This! is an education and empowerment project. It provides innovative correspondence courses to individuals incarcerated in Pennsylvania, with a special focus on the participation of prisoners in solitary confinement or maximum security, who often have little access to educational options. Five courses are currently offered; the Youth Empowerment course described above will be the sixth. You can learn more about Address This! at http://books throughbars.org/programs/address-this/
An interview with Dexter Rose and Jenna Peters-Golden of Philly Stands Up

We know that mass incarceration is an ineffective response to acts of harm that take place in our communities. But what are the alternatives? Philly Stands Up is an organization that is grappling with that question and working to create processes of accountability outside the criminal justice system. Their focus is on transforming behavior of perpetrators of harm, while facilitating healing for survivors of harm—something that current responses to crime often fail to do.

What work do you do outside of Books Through Bars?

Philly Stands Up (PSU) is a small collective of folks who are dedicated to confronting sexual assault and intimate partner abuse within queer and radical communities. We see our work as supporting survivors of sexual assault by working with people who perpetrate harm. In PSU, we facilitate individuals through processes which hold them accountable and responsible for their actions and work to transform their behavior. Our work is a part of a bigger movement of prison abolition/decarceration, working towards ending sexual assault, working towards racial justice, and towards practices of feminism and queer liberation; the intersection of these visions and communities asks us to learn, share, question, and grow together.

What connects Philly Stands Up to Books Through Bars?

PSU was asked to create a curriculum for the Address This! project (see page 2 for more information on Address This!). Members of PSU came together to research and create a curriculum of readings and reflective questions for a six unit course that kicked off in the fall of 2011. We entitled the course “Putting the ‘Us’ Back in Justice: Alternatives to Police, Courts and Prisons.”

How does your work with Address This! intersect with the other work that you do?

PSU’s work to address sexual assault without the intervention of police or court systems is a beautiful, emotional, and at times confusing and challenging process. We are keenly aware that our presence and goals in our work come from a deep commitment to prison abolition and are rooted in our hope and vision of a world without prisons and with creative responses from communities affected by the harm committed. Being a part of Address This! is an opportunity for our work and politics to be shaped and influenced by folks whose perspective on harm, cycles of violence, and the effects of mass incarceration we value and honor immensely.

BTB HIGHLIGHTS: 2012-13

Look what BTB accomplished—thanks to your support—this program year!

- Sent out over 7,000 book packages to prisoners in PA and surrounding states
- Enrolled 150 participants in Address This! correspondence courses (see page 2 for more info)
- Provided educational service-learning sessions for a dozen groups, including students from the University of Pennsylvania, Broad Street Ministry, and Mill Creek school.
- Introduced approximately 400 new volunteers to our work
- Redesigned our website to be more user-friendly and more informative (see page 5 for more info)
- Received grants from the Sparkplug Foundation (for expanding the Address This! project) and the Phoebus Criminal Justice Initiative/Bread and Roses Fund.
Because of the subjects I asked for and the amazing attention paid to those requests, I’m left to believe whoever filled my order went out of their way to locate these books, someone special, someone with a kind giving heart to care enough to go to this trouble. Whoever you are I want you to know that you touched me.

— a prisoner in PA

Because of the economic incentives of private prisons far outweigh the morality of such a law. With the capacity to “house” 5,000 people at a time, these futuristic prisons all but guarantee a spot for those students who can’t find work, and end up engaging other activities as a means of survival or rebellion against the system that left them to fend for themselves.

What may surprise most people is that the environment on the insides of prisons, are near replicas of the environment outside of prisons. Starting with a democratic president—Bill Clinton—education and vocational programming [for prisoners] has been gutted. And each successive president has continued the process, guaranteeing that most prisoners will re-offend, due to the lack of preventative measures for re-entry...

As prisoners, we too would love to stand unified and fight for equality, decent pay, good education, health care, and better living conditions. But inside of these inhuman human warehouses, there exists a prison within the prison. A dungeon where torture and human experimentation are commonplace. Where political prisoners like Russell “Maroon” Shoatz have been illegally held for over 30 years: Solitary Confinement, A.K.A. “The Hole”.

For years, solitary confinement has been used for the purpose of intimidating the prison population...It’s meant to be an incentive for prisoners to not rebel against the corrupt status quo. Solitary confinement is to prisoners what prison is to the average citizen, but heightened to an unimaginable degree. It is a “stop” sign, a red light. A prophetic warning to all of us to stop fighting for justice, or end up trapped in its clutches. The same way that it was used on our heroes—Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, Nelson Mandela. The list goes on. Too many prisoners never make it out of solitary confinement; forgotten by a society who has been tricked into believing that all prisoners are evil criminals. Society is a reflection of how it treats its prisoners. But in this case, prisons are starting to reflect society.

In closing, all students, parents and teachers must remain united in our demands that our youth’s future cannot be bought or sold by the stroke of a politician’s pen, or gambled away on the whim of an investment banker’s hunch. The safe haven of our youth, and the infrastructure of our communities will not be used as political dominoes. You must demand that prison construction be immediately discontinued and that those funds be reassigned to the revitalization of education, and other, programming, including the rehiring of teachers, counselors, instructors, and safety staff. You must demand that corporations be required to pay their fair share of taxes, so that public programming will never again have to bear the brunt of budget cuts. And you must demand that those taxes be reinvested in the community, so that the prison pipeline can no longer claim as its victims your sons and daughters, nephews and nieces.

And if your demands continue to be met with indifference — or outright opposition — your actions must speak louder than your words.

**Fund the Schoolhouse** (continued from p. 1)

**PRISONERS AT SCI FOREST RAISE $1,000 FOR BTB**

We’re pleased to announce that prisoners at the State Correctional Institution—Forest (in Marienville, PA) recently made a $1,000 donation to Books Through Bars. The money was raised at a “Sport-a-thon,” held on 10/3. Prisoners made donations to participate in quarter, half, and full marathons, as well as handball, basketball and bean bag tournaments. The Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh’s free clinic and the local fire department also received donations from the event.

We are honored and amazed by the generosity of the prisoners at SCI Forest. We hope you’ll consider contributing to BTB as well. Visit www.booksthroughbars.org to donate online, or send a check, payable to Books Through Bars, to 4722 Baltimore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143.
New Website Launch

We’re very excited to have launched a new web site in October 2013. The new site highlights the work of our volunteers and the voices of prisoners themselves, while making it easier for people to donate books and funds.

The site has a lot of interesting new content, including slideshows of prisoner art, thank you letters, volunteer testimonials and “the story of a letter”—a slideshow explaining what we do on a daily basis.

The site was also designed to work on any device, from phones and tablets to laptop and desktop computers.

The website was donated by Glint House and designed by the company’s owners, Daria Panichas and Tommy Hansen.

Visit the site at www.booksthroughbars.org and let us know what you think!

Volunteer Forum
Wednesday, November 20

There is so much to do at BTB! But sometimes, people who want to get involved are not able to attend our regularly scheduled packing sessions. Others who attend the packing sessions have special skills to share, but aren’t sure how to plug in. We created the Volunteer Forum to meet these needs.

Volunteer Forums will happen every other month. They will be a time for volunteers to meet one another, discuss successes and challenges, learn about prison issues in PA and find out about new BTB projects they can get involved in. The first-ever volunteer forum will be held on Wednesday, Nov. 20 from 7:30 - 8:30pm. We hope you’ll come! If you’re interested, please email volunteer@booksthroughbars.org. You can also email that address if you can’t come this time, but would like to be informed about future Volunteer Forums and learn about ways to support BTB!

Some BTB projects that need you:

- Fundraising committee
- Packing session hosts (show new volunteers the ropes and make sure the packing sessions are running smoothly, along with a co-host)
- Address This!—transcription
- Documentarian—photograph BTB packing sessions and events

When possible could you send me something on classical African civilizations and/or general health and nutrition. Everything is greatly appreciated...

I was only 15 the last time I was on the street. I’ll be 30 in January... One love to the staff at Books Through Bars. Book me!

—H.A., a prisoner in PA
Spotlight on:

Volunteers

Books Through Bars is an all-volunteer organization. We couldn’t do the good work we do without the help of hundreds of volunteers—from folks who attend our packing sessions just once to people who’ve been involved for many years. These comments from volunteers show the broad range of experiences they bring and the many reasons they enjoy the work.

Joe
It’s important, when you’re behind bars, to know that someone does care, even if you don’t know them. It gives you a little hope. I actually know some guys that are locked up, and I know they would appreciate getting books. I think this is an awesome program.

Kellie
The first time I came to Books Through Bars, I was supervising a group of teenagers who were participating in a summer service program. This was by far everyone’s favorite volunteer experience...They learned so much about the prison system, while feeling that they concretely addressed a need. I continue to come here with my partner and with my teenage daughter, and when we leave we always feel we have really done something to help someone.

Will
When I talk to my family that comes from Sweden and Finland, their question when someone commits a crime is, how does the sentence relate to the crime? What good does the sentence do? In Sweden or Finland, they are more likely to put people who commit low-level crimes on work release. They are also given counseling. Our system in the US just warehouses people, throws them into prison and forgets them. Books Through Bars is a way that I can help that is concrete.

Chris
I help out with BTB because the United States imprisons millions of people. Books Through Bars does a great job of raising awareness about the problems of the prison system and at the same time giving help to people caught inside those cages.

I just wanted to say a huge thank you for the biology book. This is the newest edition of the very same book I had in the county jail. I can pick up my studies right where I left off. Thank you so very much. This was a wonderful surprise.
— a prisoner in PA

Volunteers

I help out with BTB because the United States imprisons millions of people. Books Through Bars does a great job of raising awareness about the problems of the prison system and at the same time giving help to people caught inside those cages.
I simply would like to thank you so very much for the legal books which I have received. Most of all thank you for the legal dictionary. It is absolutely the best of its kind.

—W.C., a prisoner in PA

Scout
I went to school for library science, and I’m a big reader. I like being able to use what I’ve learned for such a great organization. Filling every request is like a treasure hunt!

Martina
I’m a high school French teacher. Language, words, and education are really important to me. I believe that all words that are written deserve to be read, and some of the letters from the prisoners are really heartfelt. I feel like this is really important work that needs to be done, to show prisoners that people on the outside care about them, that they matter and that we haven’t forgotten about them.

Lisa
I think Books Through Bars is an important cause to try to help the system improve so that, when prisoners get out of prisons, they have options. I think it’s nice to work with like-minded people who want to try to help out and make a difference. I hope that more and more people come and help out, because it’s an important cause.

Instead of Prisons...

What would our world look like if resources were directed towards community needs and away from mass incarceration? Each day through December 31, Decarcerate PA is posting a visual response to that question—and sharing ways to start making that vision a reality. Learn more about Decarcerate PA and the #insteadofprisons campaign at:
http://decarceratepa.tumblr.com/ or https://www.facebook.com/DecarceratePA
Donate Books – Get Involved

Books Through Bars is dependent upon your donations of quality reading material. We ALWAYS need the following kinds of books:

- Dictionaries (English, Spanish-English, law)
- Black history and fiction
- Legal resources
- GED study guides
- High-school level textbooks and workbooks in paperback
- Introductory College textbooks in paperback
- Yoga, meditation, and exercise
- Vocational skills
- Money management, personal finance, small business
- Instructional art books (how to draw, paint, etc.)

For all categories, paperback books are greatly 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.

Books can be donated Tuesday evenings 7:30-9:30pm and the 1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month 11am - 2pm at 4722 Baltimore Ave, Philadelphia. Contact us to arrange an alternate drop-off time.

Volunteer with Books Through Bars!
Drop-in volunteering sessions happen every Tuesday evening from 7:30 - 9:30 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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Philadelphia, PA 19143
www.booksthroughbars.org
(215) 727-8170