

NEWS > EDUCATION

Santa Cruz Public Libraries bring books to jail

By **JESSICA A. YORK** | jjork@santacruzsentinel.com | Santa Cruz Sentinel

PUBLISHED: June 25, 2016 at 12:00 a.m. | UPDATED: September 11, 2018 at 12:00 a.m.

WATSONVILLE >> The readers' preferences were clear: no "Little House on the Prairie." Never "Little House on the Prairie."

Sue Graziano, division manager for [Santa Cruz Public Libraries](#) with 38 years in the profession, shook her head and laughed at the poor reception Laura Ingalls Wilder's classic tale had earned among inmates three separate times at several Santa Cruz County jail facilities.

Launching the library system's twice-a-month service in the jails, she said, has meant getting a feel for where inmates' reading interests are likely to gravitate, and letting go of stereotypes.

"That's not to say that 'Secret Garden' didn't go out, and some others that I was surprised about," Graziano said. "I've fielded request for 'Don Quixote,' 'Count of Monte Cristo.'" Part of the population is very literary."

OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM

On a library visit last month, a supervising officer opened the door to Rountree's R unit. In the large common area, six inmates strayed from their living quarters and the TV area, opting to line up in front of a small vacant office for their one-hour library period. Through a large window into the office, two Santa Cruz Libraries staff were rapidly moving a few hundred books from clear plastic crates they roll in on collapsible carts onto folding tables. The offerings were spread invitingly in tiled rows, divided into fiction and nonfiction areas. On this day, the graphic novels flew off the table with unusual haste.

As 25-year-old Johannes Valenzuela, of Santa Cruz, began to explain why he enjoys the library visits, a fellow inmate shushed him, urging him not to talk to a reporter. Valenzuela persisted, however, showing off his selection of autobiographies: one, the memoir depicting the author's spiritual survival in Nazi death camps; another by Red Hot Chili Pepper lead singer Anthony Kiedes; a third the recovery story of a young methamphetamine addict.

"I think it's killer," Valenzuela said of the library service. "Santa Cruz is leading the way in a lot of this stuff. It's another way to bridge the gap between jail and community. For inmates, it breaks the stereotypes that 'mainstream' is bad and wants us to stay here."

Graziano, with half a dozen others from Santa Cruz Libraries, has been providing public library services to four jail facilities in Santa Cruz County since September. Creating the program took a bit of navigating, as county-level jail libraries often end with community donations collected by a public library.

Instead, Santa Cruz's model involves a more traditional loan-and-return process, with one-on-one recommendations and reference lookups, interlibrary loans and curated offerings at each visit. Standalone library programs tend also to exist inside the higher-level state prison facilities. In New York City, for example, the public library system offers a program similar to Santa Cruz's, but in partnership with the prison, rather than jail, population.

Locally, library officials doubled their monthly jail visits about four months into the program, due to a positive inmate reception and availability of interested library staff members. The effort went from once a month at the men's Rountree Medium Security Facility and Santa Cruz Main Jail to twice a month, and now includes the women-only Blaine Street Facility and Juvenile Hall.

LESSONS LEARNED

Between the program's launch and mid-May, librarians had registered 516 new library card holders. Lessons learned along the way include the fact that book loss and defacement numbers are about equal, percentage wise, to what happens at traditional library branches. Juvenile Hall receives only paperback books, no jail allows borrowing of books specifying weapon-building techniques and oversized books are out all around, due to space constraints.

Several new inmate cardholders have continued their relationship with the library after their release, stopping by their local branch to update their home address and check out some new reading material. One patron told his librarian that the branch was his "second stop after getting chocolate," Graziano said.

“We do feel that we are reaching people who perhaps thought there was no place for them at the library, and now they know that there is,” Graziano said. “We hope to continue to provide this service.”

Santa Cruz’s jail library program receives strong buy-in from the Santa Cruz County Corrections, organizers said.

At Main Jail, the county’s largest facility holding some 400 inmates in a given day, maximum security conditions mean more structured access to the books than at the other jails, said Cynthia Chase, program coordinator for the Main and Blaine sites. Modifying the “very structured” daily schedules of the jails for the library program is a big deal, she said, “and yet it’s been totally accepted.”

“What’s unique about this is that we’re actually moving an entire unit out — some are pretty large, almost 50 inmates — coming out into the satellite area,” said Chase, who is also Santa Cruz’s vice mayor. “The library has really said that these are members of our community, too. I have to remind people a lot — every single person here, with the exception of the few who are pending prison sentences, they’re community members. They’re coming back to the this community.”

The program breeds responsibility and even a little responsibility skills, said Lt. Paul Ramos, Rountree’s commanding officer. The program is in good company, Ramos said: The three adult jail systems receive about 175 to 200 hours a week of noncorrections programming, the majority of that run by outside providers.

SERVING TIME

Inside R Unit, John Grisham legal thrillers kept company with “Life of Pi” on the fiction table, where 34-year-old Ryan Sater of Watsonville browsed. Sater, one month into a five-month sentence, was quick to gather three books in his arms, as he was the first to have a crack at the freshly lain table.

“I appreciate them coming here. It definitely helps pass the time and educate yourself,” said Sater after admitting he did not read as much as he should have while not in jail. “I’m trying to expand my mind. No one wants to be here, but you might as well make use of your time.”

The new program, generally offered twice a month at all four sites, has an undeniable impact on employees’ and volunteers’ time as well, organizers said. Each inmate’s book request, return and new library card registration is recorded at the jail with pen and paper, and later entered into computerized library databases. Volunteers pull book requests and help choose a variety of general options to crate in to rouse interest in varied areas, and each jail visit takes multiple hours, often at a break-neck pace.

Library workers, who are already trained in confidentiality practices, are instructed further to keep a professional distance from inmates. Volunteer Sandra Zamora, 26, from Watsonville said she had studied criminal justice in college before she had to leave school, and was interested in taking part in the program as an opportunity to get involved.

“You can’t talk to them,” Zamora said. “It’s just pretty straightforward: Check out the books, get them what they want.”

STARTING LINE

The new jail service program’s journey began early in 2015, when the library’s Janis O’Driscoll, now interim director, got to talking with then-Corrections Bureau Chief Deputy Craig Wilson, now leading the operations division, during a social function. Moving from “why not” through the practical realities, organizers were soon bringing a mini mobile library to each jail.

O’Driscoll said Santa Cruz Libraries was fortunate in that the concept originated with a high-ranking corrections staff member.

“So, it could be quick for us, because all we had to do was figure out, could we actually do it, not, ‘Should we do it.’ That was never actually the question,” O’Driscoll said.

In previous years, the library delivered donated books for the jails’ in-house libraries.

“You’re meeting their need, and not having them try to conform to what we bring them in a box,” O’Driscoll said of the latest version of the program. “What was always frustrating to me when I was doing it before is that we would wouldn’t necessarily have what they wanted. People would come to us, ‘Do you have anything in Spanish,’ and we would have to poke around and maybe the Spanish things that we found were not interesting or not very good. We were disappointing a lot of people.”

Rountree inmate Chris Scroggins, 32, of Ben Lomond, said he reads for both entertainment and education. He recently sped through a Jack Reacher series novel in two days, too engrossed to get much sleep in between.

Scroggins, who had been in jail for the past four months, was able to access the system’s inter-library loan to obtain a firefighting tactics instructional book. He said he would be transferring to prison to face a longer sentence, where he planned to take part in the inmate firefighting program.

“I can study a little before, hopefully get a jump-start and get a better job,” said Scroggins of his plan. “It’s a good way to pass the time. In a roundabout way, it makes you more of a whole person.”

Jessica A. York | Reporter

Jessica A. York covers Santa Cruz government, water issues and homelessness for the Sentinel. She has been a working journalist, on both coasts, since 2004.

jyork@santacruzsentinel.com

[Follow Jessica A. York @reporterjess](#)