

BAYA May 2004 Program: Booktalking to Incarcerated Teens

Marianne Pridemore, a now-retired young adult librarian with Santa Clara County Library, spoke about her experiences booktalking to teens in Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. She began this work in 1996 as part of a city-wide “Youth At Risk” project promoted by San Jose’s mayor. Working with a teacher at the Juvenile Hall, she began bringing discarded library books and presenting booktalks to incarcerated teens. Due to safety rules at juvenile hall she could bring paperback books only but she learned to cut off the covers from hardback books so as to provide more books for the kids. Magazines were also prohibited due to the staples. Marianne asked colleagues to send her discarded books. Two grants from Philanthropic Ventures provided her with money to purchase new material as well.

She said she felt very comfortable working with the boys at juvenile hall and became quite close with one boy (Juan) who called her “mom.” He is now incarcerated at California Youth Authority where she continues to correspond with him. She read a very moving letter Juan wrote on her behalf, supporting the booktalking program at Juvenile Hall.

Finding books to appeal to this population was challenging. Many kids were not fluent readers of English so Marianne had to find books that were appealing (i.e. not childlike) but not too difficult to read. She provided dictionaries for those kids who wanted to read books above their reading level so they could look up the words they didn’t know. Popular authors included Donald Goines, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Jackie Collins and R.L. Stine (Goosebumps, Fear Street). She also provided GED prep books, ESL materials, Spanish language books, graphic novels, biographies of teen and pop stars, humor books (Mad, Calvin & Hobbes, Garfield, Far Side, etc.) and others.

She says her work with incarcerated teens was the best work she’s done as a librarian and as a human. The population she served was by far the neediest she’s ever worked with and she never felt afraid even during times of unrest at the hall. She was never interested in knowing why the teens were in Juvenile Hall; she just wanted to bring books to these young people and to share the joy of reading with them.

Program: Working with Teens in the Juvenile Justice System

Jermaine Hardy, Deputy Probation Officer Gang Unit for Santa Clara County, presented an overview of his work with teens in the probation system. He began by sharing his personal history of being a gang member himself as a teen in Merced. In spite of his gang activities he succeeded in school with the help of a high school counselor who helped him get into Santa Clara University. There he met a probation officer who inspired him to leave the “thug life” behind and consider a career as a probation officer. Mr. Hardy graduated from college in 1994 and went to work for three years in Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. He then was posted to a boys ranch (the next level of confinement for youthful offenders) and was given a caseload of 10-15 boys to counsel. In both assignments, Mr. Hardy taught conflict resolution skills and was impressed with how

much the kids had to offer. He feels that they are mostly good kids at heart who need re-direction rather than punishment. He now works for the Gang Unit of Santa Clara County assigned to San Jose's east side.

Summary of Question & Answer Session:

Q: Did the library play any role in your life?

A: Yes, I loved to read and used both the school and city library.

Q: What advice do you have for librarians who must deal with tough kids in libraries?

A: Enforce the library rules in a respectful manner. Most kids will respond with respect if approached with respect. Don't pre-judge the kids and try to approach kids individually rather than when they are in a group.

Q: Can you describe your work on the gang unit now?

A: My focus has shifted to trying to catch kids at a younger age to divert them from joining gangs or even pulling them out of gangs if they haven't been in too long. I now work with adults as well.

Q: Are you aware of or involved in any restorative justice programs?

A: Yes, Santa Clara County is a model for restorative justice. We have neighborhood accountability boards that determine various forms of restitution for youthful offenders. Often offenders are released from probation once they've completed the restitution process.

Q: Can you describe the juvenile justice process?

A: There are 2 types of arrests. One is a *citation* whereby a youth is signed over to the parent or guardian and the citation is forwarded to probation, usually to a restorative justice program. The second type of arrest is an *offense* whereby a youth is taken into Juvenile Hall for committing an act of violence. Depending on the nature of the offense, the youth either stays at Juvenile Hall or is released back into the community.

Juvenile Hall houses "602" residents only. Briefly, welfare institution codes categorize wardship as follows:

300: Dependent Child of the Court: the court takes custody of a youth who has been removed from the family. The youth is not on probation and is usually sent to a shelter.

601: Status Offenders: Court takes custody of higher risk youth such as runaways and truants.

602: Law Violators: Youth are judged wards of court due to criminal matter. Youth are not convicted but, rather, the "findings are found true" by a judge in a criminal matter.

Q: Do juvenile offenders carry their records for life?

A: Certain offenses such as arson, murder and rape, are not sealable. Other offenses can be sealed. This is why the language in juvenile court is “the findings are found true” rather than “convicted.” Those youth in this category are able to fill out job application forms truthfully because they have never been “convicted” of a crime.

Q: At what level of offense do offenders do community service work?

A: All levels. Youth are typically diverted to church programs and city work programs.

Q: Is the process different for drug-addicted kids?

A: Due to limited space in treatment programs, only chronically addicted kids or full blown alcoholics are sent into treatment.

Q: What happens to the parents of youthful offenders?

A: Since the parents are not on probation the court cannot force the parents to do anything but probation officers can recommend they get counseling or treatment if needed.

Q: Do you have any comments about the recent allegations of abuse by counselors at the California Youth Authority?

A: I feel that, in Santa Clara County, those who work in the juvenile justice system are a professional and compassionate group. The allegations of abuse are unfounded but, due to the publicity of these allegations, morale is at an all time low and more staff are being attacked by youth because the youth feel empowered to do so.

Q: Do you use the publication *The Beat Within*?

A: I don't like this publication because it promotes the gang life covertly through its illustrations.

Q: How does a lay person identify gang attributes?

A: Gangs adopt particular colors, numbers, letters and clothing styles. In the probation system, we use 8 indicators of gang affiliation and, to positively identify a gang member, we need to find 2 of the 8 indicators present.