Chapter 11
A Rite of Passage:
New York Public Library Passages Academy

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ABSTRACT

In New York City, over five thousand young adults are taken in to custody by the city’s department of juvenile justice. (Fenster-Sparber, 2008). While in detention, they do not have easy access to books, and literacy is not always a priority. Although attempts have been made to incorporate library sites throughout New York City’s juvenile correctional facilities, students there have limited access to educational materials. Research shows that a higher literacy rate in such facilities can play a vital role in an incarcerated teen’s rehabilitation process. The New York Public Library (NYPL) saw an opportunity to reach students who might otherwise not be able to get access to information and build a long-lasting outreach program with Passages Academy, a multi-site correctional school run by New York City’s Department of Education and the Department of Juvenile Justice. This case study describes New York Public Library’s mission at Passages Academy, which started shortly after Passages was established in 1998 and continues to be a strong community partner today. The author, who also participated in the project, interviewed NYPL librarians and Passages Academy librarians and educators to gain a better understanding of their challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries have always been centers for local community involvement, often able to reach communities that would otherwise not have access to information and educational resources. This chapter examines how young adult (YA) librarians from New York Public Library (NYPL) embarked on a mission starting with a few librarians in 1998, to provide outreach to New York City’s most overlooked citizens: the incarcerated youth.

NYPL already has a well-established relationship with Riker’s Island, New York City’s jail for adult offenders. However, there are many other juvenile detention sites throughout New York City’s five boroughs that are often overlooked. One of them is Passages Academy. Since 1998, YA librarians from NYPL arranged outreach...
programs for many of Passages’ sites by giving gently used books to teachers who work in the detention centers. Some sites gathered enough books to make their own small libraries. During their site visits, NYPL librarians often provided an introduction to the library and a chance for the students to receive their own library cards. They also prepared book talks that highlighted the books already on site or brought in donated books for the teens to choose from and keep.

The outreach project was spearheaded mainly by the passion of NYPL’s librarians and librarians and educators of Passages Academy. It was sometimes difficult to make time for regular visits to detention centers, even if they were in the local area, and the effort itself at times seemed discouraging as librarians were not always sure if they were really connecting with the students. However, weeks later, when they read the evaluations and heard how much the students enjoyed their presentations and appreciated receiving books from them, some of which they could keep for their own private collection, the project became much more meaningful for everyone involved.

This case study first focuses on the how the educational system works in the department of Juvenile Justice. Passages Academy is not a single school building in New York City but a collection of sites throughout the Bronx and Brooklyn and serves a student body which changes almost daily. A brief history of NYPL’s outreach services for the city’s incarcerated patrons is also provided, as well as information on how the library first started working with New York City’s juvenile offenders. The focus will then shift to the most recent collaboration between NYPL and Passages, with a special emphasis placed on class visits and the challenges librarians and educators confronted when faced with underserved young students. While outreach programs started at Passages Academy in 1998, the focus of this case study will be on the experiences of YA librarians from 2006 to the present day.

BACKGROUND

NYPL has a long-standing tradition of service for incarcerated patrons. Its Prison Library program started in the mid 1970s with the help of state funding. It was coordinated through the office of special services and became an integral part of the library’s outreach program. Today, there is a department established solely for the support of New York’s incarcerated adults. This outreach is three-fold. First, there are regular visits to Riker’s Island where the Correctional Services volunteers deliver books that have been donated for the inmates and run four mobile libraries throughout the Island. Second is the reference work. Each week the Correctional Services Department receives about 60 letters from inmates who are usually looking for information that they will need after their release. The demand for this information is so great that NYPL started a publication called “Connections,” an annual guide for recently released inmates that can be downloaded from NYPL’s website for free. Most library branches also have a printed copy available at the reference desk. The third and final component are the various programs, one of which is the recently implemented “Daddy and Me” program at Riker’s Island. There, fathers take literacy classes and then record themselves reading popular children’s books. The recordings are then sent to their children.

Since the mid 1970s, outreach services between NYPL and Riker’s Island flourished. Juvenile detention centers did not receive the same kind of attention. Although library outreach for these sites started around the same time as outreach for adult inmates at Riker’s Island, it was conducted in a less official way. In the mid 1970s, Ma’lis Wendt, who was a YA Spanish specialist for NYPL, started paying visits to schools and community centers in the South Bronx. One of these visits was the Spofford Detention Center, which she visited several times, each time taking 16mm films and a projector to the center to show educational and recreational films from the NYPL collection.
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