SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN PRESS

A Phelps Correctional Center inmate reads to his child during visiting hours.

Program gives inmates chance for positive activity with children

BY ELONA WESTON
AMERICAN PRESS

DEQUINCY — Jolene Constance thinks a good book can bring a family together despite the miles — and prison bars — in between.

Constance, the assistant warden of Phelps Correctional Center in DeQuincy, helped develop a prison-sponsored literacy program that allows inmates to read to their children during weekend visits.

Inmates are only allotted four hours of visitation each month, but Constance said the program helps children get the most out of their time with their fathers, or in some cases, brothers.

"We can't improve the quantity of time, but we can do something to change the quality," she said.

'We know *victims' rights, and we agree with victims' rights, but we also see children who come to see their parents four hours a month.'*

Jolene Constance
Assistant warden, C. Paul Phelps Correctional Center

The program, called Men Read, got its start two years ago after Constance attended a national conference where she learned about the hardships that children of inmates face.

Constance said children are crime's "silent victims," and are a component of the prison system that society often overlooks.

"We know victims' rights, and we agree with victims' rights, but we also see children who come to see their parents four hours a month," she said. "We see them when they walk in those doors, and we see them when they leave out. We see some very happy faces when they see their parents, and we see some very sad faces when they go to leave."

Constance said the object of Men Read is to help

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inmates bond with children and to improve inmates' literacy. She said a large number of inmates at Phelps — a medium-security prison that houses 920 men — are illiterate.

"Statistically, high school dropouts are candidates for prison," she said. "We feel this is a deterrent for recidivism."

Constance said the program is "simple." Inmates practice their reading skills using children's books and then read those books to their children — or in some cases, young relatives — during visits.

The children then get to keep the books.

The program was first open to only prison literacy program participants, but it became so popular that Phelps decided to expand it to the whole prison population.

"The inmates really loved the program because they were given the chance to give that child a gift — the book," Constance said. "And then they were actually able to read to their children, and usually that type of situation is not available in the prison setting."

But the prison gives books to everyone during visits — adults and children.

Constance said the prison gets no state funding for the program and gets books from private donors and book companies. Since the program began, 10,000 books have been given away. "The clients that we see, most of them are low-income level and some of the kids are living with caregivers and have parents who are both in prison. We feel they need this," she said.

Constance said the prison has also seen an increase in inmates obtaining their GEDs and that the once-untouched children's section of the prison library is now popular.

"The stigma is gone," she said.

Constance said inmates practice hard on their reading so they can make a good impression on their children during visits.

"They do not want to come off as a bad reader to their child. We tell them this is their one time to be a positive role model for that child. Everything else has been negative, but this is their chance to change that," she said.

Several inmates spoke to the *American Press* on Friday about how the program has helped them. Draughn Koonce, 31, reads with his son during visits. He thinks it encourages his son to read at home.

"It's good to be able to help him. My son is in elementary school, and he is beginning to read. It is really beneficial to be able to build his creativity," he said.

Inmates James Ivory, 49, and Michael Johnson, 46, are literacy program volunteers. They hand out books during visitation hours and said they got involved because they wanted to be a part of the difference the program makes.

"It brings people together in a positive way," Ivory said. "It's fun and inspiring to see these kids who are so excited to get these books and have their parent or parents involved with it."

Johnson said the program has changed him for the better.

"It has inspired me to realize and understand that when we want to do something great sometimes it's just the small things that we do in our life that has a drastic effect on people," he said.

Hector Factor, 30, said the program helped develop his English skills. Factor is Hispanic and has young daughters.

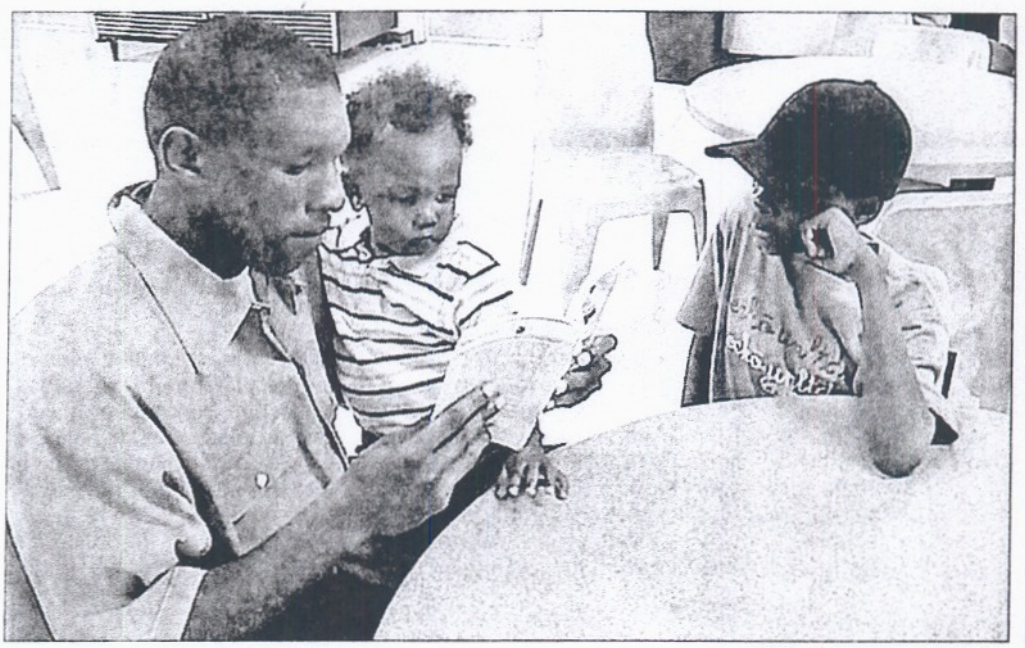
"When I came here I did not know how to read that well. I could speak Spanish, but I could not read Spanish. Now that I have read more, I can read Spanish, I can write in Spanish and read better in English," he said.

John Palfrey, 32, said the program has helped him conquer his fear of reading.

"Reading, for me, was more of a challenge. I was basically embarrassed to read because I didn't read too well, but through reading, I became better. After a while, it became something I really enjoyed doing. Now, you can't even catch me without a book," he said.

Palfrey reads to his daughter when she comes to see him. He said he looks forward to those times.

"I think she loves to read because I love to read," he said. "There's no feeling in the world like reading to a child."



SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN PRESS

The C. Paul Phelps Correctional Center literacy program helps inmates learn to read while also helping them bond with their children.

Prison program recognized nationally

Men Read, which was launched by Phelps Correctional Center, was honored in 2006, its first year, by USA Weekend.

The program has received national and state recognition. The latest honor was for Assistant Warden Jolene Constance, who received an award from the state secretary of corrections for her work on the program.

Constance said Prevent Child Abuse Louisiana will start a program at Phelps called Read To Me Daddy that will allow inmates to send DVDs of themselves reading to their children.

Constance said this is ideal for inmates whose children live too far to travel to DeQuincy for visits.

Along with the DVDs, the books featured in the reading sessions will be sent to the children.

Phelps accepts donations of new books to the Men Read program. Used books are also accepted for the prison's library.

The following is a letter from an inmate to Phelps Correctional Center Assistant Warden Jolene Constance:

Dear Warden Constance,

I would like to tell you how much I appreciate your book program at the visitation buildings on weekends.

My wife and I have three children and their ages range from 4 years old to 12 years old. And unfortunately, I never read to them when I was at home. I always thought that I was too busy at my place of business. I now see how much it means to them when I do read to them. It is something that I wish I would have been doing for them all along. I now know that we are never too busy for that. It has definitely brought my children and I a whole lot closer.

I am convinced that prison will build good character if we will just allow it to do so and such programs like this is what helps.

I really do appreciate the program and I hope that you will be able to continue the program for my family and myself for what short time I have left and all the families in the future.

It will definitely bring you closer to your family. I pray to God that I will always take the time to continue to read to my children when I get home.

Below are excerpts from letters from inmates' family members to Constance about the Men Read program:

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"My children and I all enjoy the books at each visit. To see their father sit with them and read is a welcomed sight for all of us."

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"Children follow the examples of their fathers. It is very rewarding to see fathers reading to and with their children — no matter what circumstances surround their lives."

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"It is so wonderful to see dads reading to their children when I bring my brothers' boys to see him or my grandchildren. They are so excited about getting the books and having him read to them."