

Inmates connect with their kids by book recordings

BY STEPHANIE BRZEZINSKI
Traverse City Record-Eagle

Traverse City — Connie Eisenhart of Traverse City founded the nonprofit Remain in Touch in May 2016. Eisenhart, a retired teacher, said she decided to start the program in Leelanau County after seeing a similar program downstate.

Remain in Touch aims to connect inmates with their children, Eisenhart said. She and a few trained volunteers visit the Leelanau County and Benzie County jails twice a month to record parents reading to their child.

The recording is put onto a CD, which Eisenhart said is mailed to the child along with the book.

“This was a need that was not being met,” Eisenhart said. “Everybody wins. The inmate stays connected to family and the child stays connected to their parent.”

Eisenhart said they can hear their parent’s voice anytime they want, in addition to other benefits.

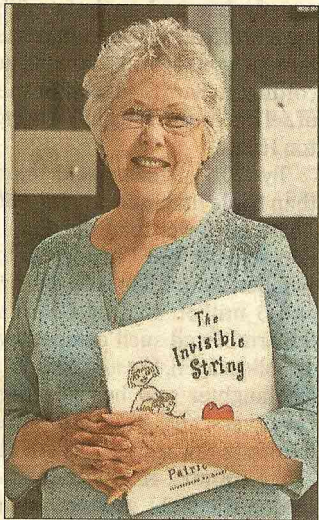
“They enter school better prepared,” she said. “They are more likely to graduate high school and they do not end up in jail. If their literacy improves, so do the chances of the child being successful in life.”

Inmates may participate, Eisenhart said, if they have a viable address for the kids and do not have a personal protection order.

Remain in Touch provides books for children ages up to age 12. Eisenhart said they have recorded books for newborns and infants and longer books for fourth- and fifth-graders.

“They read one chapter and then the child finishes it on their own,” she said. “They can do it as many times as they want, depending on their sentence.”

The parent selects a book from the jail’s cart, which Eisenhart said they replenish when they visit. Eisenhart said Nancy Tillman’s story “Wherever You



Tessa Lighty / AP

Connie Eisenhart visits Leelanau County Jail twice a month to record inmates reading.

Are: “My Love will Find You” is chosen the most.

“We try to do things that have been determined good children’s literature,” she said. They usually pick texts that received the Newberry or Caldecott medals.

Eisenhart said inmates and jail officials have shown an interest and tell others to participate. Eisenhart added that they are working to bring the program to the Grand Traverse County jail.

Lynn Hansen of Lake Leelanau is a board member of Remain in Touch. Eisenhart asked Hansen to join because of her education background.

“I taught 30 years in elementary school,” she said. “I saw children whose parents were (incarcerated). Anyway you can help them through that rough time makes it worthwhile.”

She selects and orders the books that go to the jail. Hansen said she chooses a variety of texts for a variety of interests.

“I include books that are great for kids of different ages,” she said. “We look for books that fit different backgrounds and cultures. Some are bilingual; some are written by Native American authors.”