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Literacy program continues to keep inmates, children connected



Connie Eisenhart, founder of the Remain in Touch program, holds up one of the most chosen children's story books among inmates. With the help of a facilitator, the inmate chooses from a variety of brand new, age-appropriate books available for young children. Enterprise photo by Meakalia Previch-Liu

As COVID-19 restrictions ease slowly within county jails, Connie Eisenhart, founder of the program "Remain in Touch," said her staff want to continue reaching as many interested inmates as they can despite the setbacks over the past two years.

"Our program is still going strong, but COVID was devastating to the program in that no one (volunteers) was allowed into the jails," Eisenhart said. "We're very hopeful we'll be able to get back in there and reach inmates sooner than later."

The nonprofit organization and program first started in 2016, and its mission from the beginning was to help incarcerated parents stay connected with their children utilizing the power of literacy and books. Through the program, parents in jail can choose a new free book for each of their children, and inmates then read the book aloud while it's recorded by a facilitator.

Facilitators, who are all volunteers and are unpaid, then transfer the recording to a CD and send it off along with the book to each individual child.

However, on March 12, 2020, program operations were abruptly put on hold as the coronavirus first spread and states put in place regulations to try and contain it.

During the last couple years as organizations and institutions found their way among the global pandemic, Eisenhart said she has not sat idle.

The program continues to stock new books, write grants, and spread the word about everything the literacy element has to offer incarcerated parents. They have also reached numerous people in Traverse City that support the Remain in Touch program expanding to the Grand Traverse County Jail.

“Our immediate goal as more and more opens up again would be to expand to the Grand Traverse County Jail — we’re hopeful that in the near future we might have the opportunity to reach people there too, and of course sooner at the jail in Leelanau.”

Leelanau County Jail can house up to 73 inmates, and its average daily population increased from 12 in 2020 to 14 in 2021, according to the sheriff’s office 2021 annual report.

In July of 2021, program staff was granted permission to go back into the Benzie County Jail. Just three months later, the program was put on hold once again due to continuous COVID incidents. April was the first time since 2021 that staff was able to resume the program again. Leelanau County Jail remains closed to the program’s resources and volunteers after two years though.

Eisenhart anticipates her team will be back in the coming months this year, adding that Leelanau County Sheriff Mike Borkovich has been encouraging her to not give up and that they will be able to continue soon. She said about 197 different incarcerated parents have selected or recorded books for their children, 334 children have received new books and recordings from their incarcerated parents, and 1,023 brand new books and recordings have been mailed and delivered to their children to date.

Without the reading-focused program, many of the inmates don’t have a means to communicate with their children. Participants are allowed to record a short, caring message to go with the book to their child and can borrow another copy of the book to read along at the same time.

When those children have this book recorded by their parents, Eisenhart said they can listen to it over and over again, and in those moments in time, they’re together. The hope would be that it opens up some line of communication.

“It changes the life and the relationship of the incarcerated parent and their children,” she said. “If they stay connected, they’re less likely to re-offend, and if they don’t re-offend, that makes the community safer. Everything about it is a win-win.”

Just before the pandemic hit, Eisenhart added how they expanded the program to include books for teenagers ages 13 to 18 years of age. She noted even if the child or teenager of the incarcerated does not read the book, it is still a tangible item from a parent that says, ‘I’m thinking of you, I love you, and you’re not forgotten.’

“It is never just a book, it’s that connection while that parent is incarcerated — it’s reassuring to any child no matter how old they are that they are being thought about,” she said. “It just has so many positive aspects.”

Eisenhart is a retired teacher herself and knows first-hand the impact incarceration has on children. It is a shared sentence, she described, because the moment a parent is incarcerated, the kids are also on a path they really have no control over.

“It’s not a positive thing — I was aware of another similar program like this in the state when I first started this, and the toll it took on the children of these parents. Going in, it was always about the children. It took me a short time to realize how this impacted the whole family too,” she said. “I knew it would make a difference in their lives, but what I didn’t know is that it really is a multi-benefit program.”

While Eisenhart may have started the program when she was 75 in 2016, she is still very active till this day in the community and at church, and the Remain in Touch program has been a retirement endeavor. She has grandchildren who she loves to spend time with, and she loves to garden, read, and cook in her free time, but her focus outside of the home and family is her nonprofit and helping as many families as she can. Before starting the nonprofit, she would make a point to volunteer at pantries and the cherry festival, and through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America nonprofit.

“It’s a full-time commitment, and all of my efforts go into this program — if any of the other surrounding jails bordering Grand Traverse wanted to participate, we would be open,” she said. “Our board has worked to make a plan for the program to go on after I’m gone. We have six facilitators, three in each of the two jails we are at, and about 15 constant volunteers. But I want this program to continue for years to come.”