

Volunteer programs help people in jail stay connected

Colin Merry Published 5:12 pm EDT, Tuesday, September 24, 2019



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The Remain in Touch program, which helps keep people in the Benzie County Jail stay connected to their families, often receives letters of thanks or drawings of from the children of parents in the program. ... [more](#)

BENZIE COUNTY — Several volunteer organizations are helping people incarcerated in the Benzie County Jail continue to be connected with their families and the community.

Remain in Touch

Remain in Touch volunteers started visiting the Benzie County Jail to help inmates stay connected with their children through reading in April of 2016. The program reaches out to inmates who are either parents or grandparents of children zero to 12 years-of-age. The inmate gets to chose a new children's book they think will be appropriate for

their children or grandchildren, and read it out loud to a program facilitator. The program facilitator records the reading and burns the recording to a compact disc, which is then sent to the children, along with a copy of the book being read.

Inmates can choose from about 200 different books that range from books for infants to about a sixth grade reading level.

Connie Eisenhart, president of Remain in Touch, said since the program was started in Benzie, 69 different inmates have recorded, 114 children have received books and recordings, and 407 of those books and recordings have been sent, in total.

"The program is doing incredibly good," Eisenhart said. "It is flourishing."

She also said people who are temporarily being housed in Benzie on behalf of other correctional facilities enjoyed the program, which they didn't have where they were originally being held.

Eisenhart said one new thing to note was that the nonprofit began getting feedback from inmates families, something they didn't do at first.

"Now, for the first time the inmate records, a feedback letter is sent to the family, so they can write a comment about how they feel about the program, or a child can draw a picture," she said. "We've gotten quotes and pictures we can use for our newsletters, and to show people curious about the program."

The program received one such letter from the grandparent of a child receiving recordings from her mother, who is incarcerated.

"The book and CD have brightened my granddaughter's nights – as she plays it over & over to hear her mom reading and telling her she loves her," the letter reads. "This is such a wonderful gift for the children and inmates who dearly miss their parents and are separated from each other so sadly. The children are the real victims – despite the mistakes the parents made. They are sadly forced to pay the price of separation and loss. The general public is unconcerned about the sorrows a "criminal" endures while incarcerated. Benzie County jail has a heart, and I will always remember the smile you put on my granddaughter's face – for allowing this good program for children!"

Funding for the program comes from grants and donations of many area nonprofit organizations, as well as fundraisers held in conjunction with area breweries.

Eisenhart said she started the program at the Leelanau County Jail in 2016, inspired by a friend who was part of a similar program in Washtenaw County.

Currently, due to problems with jail staffing, the program has been temporarily canceled. Jail staff and volunteers hope the program will be able to start again in October.

For more information, visit www.remainintouch.org or call (231) 499-0606.

Forgotten Man Ministries

Forgotten man ministries has been helping inmates connect to help from the community since April of 2016. The program connects people in jail to bible studies, biblical counseling and worship services.

Volunteers with the program can be a positive influence in their life, and try to break them out of the cycle of crime and incarceration, as well as share God's love.

Robert Wickham, chaplain for the Benzie County Jail, said the program can help put people in a better frame of mind.

"The program has helped people, but it is hard to explain," Wickham said. "You can see a change in people's overall attitudes. It seems to calm people. It gives them something to do."

Wickham said he can relate because he spent eight years in prison over two terms for three felony offenses involving home invasion, and also dealt with addiction, before finding help from members of the Fresh Wind Christian Community and the congregation's after care program for recent inmates.

"I've taken the same route, and I can help inmates walk the same walk I took," Wickham said. "I remember what it was like to be incarcerated, and volunteers would come in to talk with us. I remember appreciating that, so I'm giving back what was given to me."

Wickham said while the message is positive, he tells inmates it won't be easy, and that negative people and the old ways will tempt a person is out of prison or jail. Getting involved in the community, including faith-based organizations, is one way to fight the pressure to return to crime.

For more information on Forgotten Man Ministries, visit www.forgottenman.org or call (231) 882-4484.

Reception

Dan Smith, jail administrator, said the programs do a great job at connecting those in prison with the greater community.

"Remain in touch does great job connecting families," Smith said. It is a great idea. The child shouldn't have to suffer because parent or grandparent in jail. It is a way to stay connected, and we're hoping it comes back soon."

Smith said Forgotten Man ministries has been a great partner in scheduling and facilitating worship services.

"it has been a blessing for us; they organize all the religious services for us," he said. "They (inmates) know Wickham, and they know they can trust and confide in them. He helps them get in touch with the services they need."

Sheriff Ted Schendel said Forgotten Man Ministries helps people not only find God, but organize their lives and try to get a fresh start once they're released.

"We're happy to have these programs," Schendel said. "I'm for anything we have that can point people who have been incarcerated in a good direction."

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