



REMAIN IN TOUCH

By Connie Eisenhart

As a parent, one of the greatest joys in life is having your child curled up beside you or on your lap while you read to them. The warmth and joy shared in a book is something we hang on to for a long time. It is a building block for a love of reading. It lets us laugh, learn, imagine, and even experience suspense and the outrageously silly. It lets us travel to all kind of places in the snug, love-filled arms of a parent or someone who cares. It builds a lasting bond of love between parent and child and strengthens the basic skills of learning to read. It is a loving memory which lives in the heart and mind forever.

In May of 2016 a new program called Remain in Touch began at the Leelanau County Jail. It is based on the realization and acknowledgement of the power this bond holds. Within months of its launch in Leelanau County Jail, it expanded into the Benzie County Jail. The mission of this program is to help incarcerated parents stay connected with their children. Remain in Touch provides the opportunity for incarcerated parents to choose a new free book for each of their children 0-12 years. Grandparents may also record. A book cart of approximately 200 books is kept locked at the jail. It is filled with a large variety of books for these ages. After making their choices, inmates read each book aloud while it is being recorded by a facilitator. The recording is then transferred to a CD and sent, with the book, to each individual child. Inmates may record a book for each of their children every time Remain in Touch visits the jail. This allows inmates to stay connected with their children during their incarceration. Their child may listen to them as often as they like. They can hear their own parent's voice read aloud and recreate that close feeling in their absence. For both the parent and the child, it bridges the gap that exists during the time of incarceration. It is a dual benefit program. The inmates are allowed to say a sentence of introduction and a sentence of closing. This is strictly guarded for security reasons. It does, however, give them the opportunity to say something like "I chose this book for you because..." and close with perhaps "Good night, I love you." In that window of time, for this parent and child, they are together.

This program became an instant success. Inmates welcomed the opportunity to participate. Each time the facilitators visit they hear expressions of appreciation and gratitude. "This is a great program." "Thank you for doing this." "I will see you next time you are here." "God bless you for having this program." These are all examples of the comments they receive.

The facilitators are often struck by the emotional reaction of the inmates and the comments they have. The sincere and heartfelt feelings of

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love from the inmates comes through as the stories are read. If asked how or why they appreciate the program there are many responses. "It is important to me that my daughter can hear my voice. It will help her remember me while I am gone," said one inmate. One dad chose the book Shiloh. "I read this myself as a child and would like to share it with my son even though I am not there." Another said, "I am the only one who reads to her. I am so grateful for the program." A grandmother responded, "This is an awesome program. God bless you for doing this." For another mother, while traveling in the car, she relates, her baby was fussy. When she played the CD of her dad reading, the baby immediately stopped and listened to her father's voice. "She remembers me!" he shared with excitement when he told the facilitator about it. These responses tell us connections are being made. Families are remaining in touch and it is important to them to do so. Despite the questionable decisions they have made, inmates care deeply about their families. That is what Remain in Touch is all about. Jail Administrators Lt. Todd Roush from Leelanau and Lt. Dan Smith from Benzie state they are pleased to have RIT in the jail. They have nothing but positive feedback. Remain in Touch would be delighted to eventually expand into the Grand Traverse Jail.

As of July 16, 2018 the stats for the program are as follows: 124 different inmates have recorded, 208 different children have received books and CDs and 618 books and CDs have been mailed. That means 124 families are still connected while separated by incarceration.

Remain in Touch (a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization) is supported by grants, book clubs, churches, community service organizations and individual donations. Remain in Touch also partners with Brilliant Books, who gives a 20% discount to anyone buying books from them to donate to the program. This can be done online through the Remain in Touch website www.remainintouch.org or at Brilliant Books on Front Street in Traverse City. An approved list of books is available at the desk. The 20% discount is given at the time of purchase by identifying what they are for. A form is filled out and left with the books for tax purposes. Remain in Touch is notified of the donation. All books are picked up at Brilliant Books either way they are purchased.

If you would like to learn more about Remain in Touch, read about ways you can help or make a donation please visit us at www.remainintouch.org. You can also email us at contactus@remainintouch.org. Someone will promptly reply.

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