

# Literature-N-Living: Inspiring Youthful Offenders to Embrace Learning

By John Richter

**H**ad youthful offenders liked education, they would have stayed in school. However, since the classroom either reminded them of their failures or intimidated them because of the required hard work or for whatever other reason, they dropped out.

Now behind bars, the juveniles in Orange County Jail in Orlando, Fla., face their old nemesis again — the classroom. Schooling for these juveniles is mandatory.

In order to assist the youths, staff must find ways to help them overcome past fears and misconceptions regarding academics. The idea is not to intimidate but rather to introduce them to the values and vistas that education holds, especially literature. Therefore, new ways, nontraditional methods, as well as creative and innovative styles must be used to peak interest and motivate the juveniles. Not only must the jail furnish the tools for learning and change, but also fashion an environment conducive to change and learning.

At the Orange County Jail, which houses juveniles who have been adjudicated as adults, the focus is on reading and writing. Both male and female juveniles participate in the Literature-N-Living program. They are housed in separate facilities, but the operation of the program remains the same.

## Praise, Rewards and Leadership

A good book not only is entertaining and educational, it is also thought-provoking. The goal of the Literature-N-Living program is to focus on the participants' reading competency. Included in this is bolstering their:

- Thought process;
- Reading pace;
- Comprehension skills;
- Retention;
- Ability to formulate ideas onto paper; and
- Spelling, vocabulary and grammar.

Participation in the program is voluntary as long as the juveniles have a good attitude and are willing to try. They must also exhibit good behavior throughout the course, in the classroom and in their housing units. Nine individuals are in each course, and they are chosen based on their interest and the input of their teachers and the correctional staff. Several courses take place at a time and cater to different reading levels. Volunteers, inmates and correctional staff run this program, so it is cost-effective. The only monies expended are for the books, which are purchased through the jail's inmate welfare fund.

Literature-N-Living is a blend of literary classics and contemporary works. Novels for the classes are chosen in several ways. Reviewing the various lists of best-selling books is one avenue. Talking to book vendors, publishers or even the boys themselves is another. In addition, whoever is going to facilitate a book class may have favorites or specific titles that they want the participants to read. Some recently read books are Dean Koontz's *Odd Thomas*, Dick Tibbits' *Forgive to Live*, Dennis Lehane's *Coronado* and Hill Harper's *Letters to a Young Brother*.

Photos by John Richter



Program participants from the class "Chinese Bamboo" pose with their facilitator, Warren Kenner.



Students from Rene's class, "Rene on Reading," are reading *Letters to a Young Brother* by Hill Harper.

The facilitator's role is to make the book class fun, interesting and, most of all, relevant to the participants. The course tries to incorporate the literary action with real-life scenarios within and outside the jail setting. For example, in *Forgive to Live*, Tibbits explores how resentment can be detrimental to a person's health. The program participants enjoy giving and defending their opinions, which often leads to spirited, yet civil, debates. The students are tested on the chapters, and are given vocabulary words to study and writing assignments to complete. They also may be asked to read aloud and discuss what they have read.

The book courses take about eight weeks to complete. Classes are held once or twice a week (depending on the length of the novel), and each session is about one hour long. Their work is monitored, graded and recorded. Program participants receive certificates of accomplishment for their successes and receive verbal accolades and written remarks on papers or tests for their efforts. However, there are consequences for exerting no effort. A student who does not put forth any work may face expulsion from class, disciplinary sanctions, a negative letter to the judge, loss of program time, and no class celebration or certificate.

In the Literature-N-Living program, there are two categories of classes. While the premise is the same for both, the "teacher" aspect differs. The P.R.I.D.E. (Prisoners Reading In Detention Environment) class is conducted either by a correctional or community volunteer who is chosen by the program coordinator. On the other hand, the J.A.I.L. (Juveniles Assisting In Learning) class is taught by a juvenile either presently incarcerated or who has come back to do a class. The coordinator chooses the facilitator by looking at his or her level of responsibility and his or her willingness to formulate questions about the readings and lead class discussions. Facilitators must also be trustworthy because they take part in evaluating participant's tests and papers. For juveniles facilitating the courses, it is a chance for them to grow and experience a leadership role. They become acquainted with:

- Speaking in public;
- Handling individuals in a group setting;
- Having personal integrity;
- Developing a curriculum (questions, testing and grading);
- Delivering the message of the book; and
- Appreciating the teaching profession.

As a reward for the successful completion of the book, graduates may receive a certificate of completion, the book to keep as their own or permission to attend an in-house family dinner.

## Celebrating Success

Fashioned after public events, the family dinner is reserved for those individuals who successfully complete the class, which means they read the book and completed the required writing assignments. Inmates are allowed to have a contact visit with a designated number of family members. The family is permitted to bring in a home-cooked meal for the graduates and themselves.

There are strict rules and regulations about attire, cuisine, packaging of food and the number of guests who may attend. All visitors and food entering the facility are required to go through specified search procedures and metal detectors.

This type of contact visit is very important to all involved. The youths enjoy a home-cooked meal and share quality time with their family. They also have shared the accomplishment of setting and achieving goals. In turn, the family members get a contact visit with their child and can share in his or her accomplishments. They interact with the staff to gain a better insight into their child's behavior and to learn more about the workings of the jail and its mission statement regarding habilitation. It can strengthen family bonds or recreate them where they had been broken or unbelievably stretched. The staff's interaction with the family can help staff understand the youth's dynamics and better assist him or her.

The alternative education team members assigned to the juveniles all agree that this program greatly assists them in instructing the juveniles. The participants gain a



Participants celebrate their success at the family dinner.

new insight into themselves and raise their self-esteem. These two important elements help the participants re-evaluate their past playmates, playthings and playgrounds by comparing their new ways of thinking and accomplishments to situations that landed them in jail. They see that education may lead them in a new, more positive direction. Through self-evaluation, they also may begin to see that crime is not for them and, more important, understand the impact that their actions have had on their victims and their own families.

## Author Appreciation

Another positive point of the program is that when the youths finish reading a book, the author is always sent a packet comprising photos of the class in action, the family dinner and the participants giving a speech about what they learned from the book. Also included are the tests the juveniles took, the papers they wrote and the speeches they gave at the family event. After receiving this packet, the author may write a letter of thanks and support to the youths. Some authors have sent copies of their books and others have sent small gifts, which encouraged the participants and showed them that the authors cared. For example, John Christensen and Chart House Learning, the creators of “The Fish! Philosophy,” sent a box of stuffed “Pete the Perch” fish, the mascot for their motivational resources. In addition, Dennis Rodman sent 30 T-shirts to the participants who read his book *Bad as I Wanna Be*. The ultimate prize is that the author may come to visit the participants. So far, authors such as Ernest Gaines, Brian Jacques,

Michele Martinez, James McBride, Dennis Lehane, Dick Tibbits and Chuch Tompkins have visited the youths. The program participants gain new insights into the books through talking with the authors and are awed to know that people who are not related to them care about their welfare and wish them well in the future. Conversely, the authors leave knowing that their books help young people academically and socially, and they see that the inmates are bright and articulate individuals.

Reading is fundamental. For young people who cannot read or who read poorly, it is probable that they will be relegated to low-paying jobs and frustrating careers. As police take back the streets by arresting young offenders, jail reading programs seek to take back the minds of juvenile inmates. In a sense, reading programs, Literature-N-Living in particular, emancipate the young readers from the folly and fallacy of thug life by strengthening skills and self-esteem. Many of the participants, for the first time, have had a positive educational experience, read a book from cover to cover and accomplished a set goal. They begin to see that reading can be the key to developing new visions for a positive, fulfilling and successful life. The success of the Literature-N-Living program is evident when, at the end of the book course, a young man or woman asks, “May I get into the next book [course]?”

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