



# Words Travel

## A MODEL FAMILY-STRENGTHENING AND LITERACY PROGRAM

BY SARA URRUTIA

Last year, when Chris, a Washington state prison inmate, hoisted his 5-year-old daughter Chanell onto his lap and read her a story, the walls and barbed wire fences that separate their lives seemed to fall away. It was not always so easy for Chris to connect with his daughter.

“Being away from home, I didn’t know how to be a dad,” said Chris, a former gang member who is serving a three-year sentence for assault at Monroe Correctional Complex. That was before Summers enrolled in the Words Travel program. “Reading together has helped me to get to know my daughter better and to know what she likes,” Chris said. Right now, Chanell’s favorite storybook characters are the Powerpuff Girls and Clifford the Big Red Dog. “When I come home, I’ll be able to sit down and read with her,” he said. “It’s something we love doing together.”

The Words Travel program is a partnership of Scholastic Inc., the world’s largest publisher of children’s books; Volunteers of America, a national faith-based organization; and several correctional facilities throughout the country. It strengthens the bonds between incarcerated parents and their children through reading. In 2003, Words Travel reached more than 250 inmates — both men and women — in Indiana, Ohio, New York and Washington, and plans are under way to expand the program to other states.

According to the August 2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics special report, *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*, a majority of state (55 percent) and federal (63 percent) inmates reported having a child under the age of 18. An estimated 336,300 households with minor children were affected by the imprisonment of a resident parent.

Bob Moore, superintendent of the Monroe Correctional Complex, noted that many children whose parents are in prison grow up to become involved in criminal activity themselves. “I see inmates trying to encourage their kids to stay out of trouble, yet really have no way to give that mes-

sage and make it stick. They feel powerless and frustrated,” Moore said. “Programs like Words Travel open doors to real communication between kids and parents.”

### PROGRAM MODEL

The of the Words Travel program goals include fostering and maintaining a connection between the incarcerated parent and child, providing a positive experience between the parent and child through reading, and promoting an interest in reading on the part of both the parent and child.

Words Travel grew out of an ongoing partnership between Volunteers of America and Scholastic to distribute books to disadvantaged children nationwide. Since 1999, Volunteers of America offices across the nation have distributed more than 2 million books donated by Scholastic.

Some of those books were given to mothers at a state prison in Louisiana to read to their children during visitation. Word traveled quickly about the success of the Louisiana experiment, which led to the development of the current program, explained Karen Proctor, Scholastic vice president of community affairs and government relations. “Our relationship with Volunteers of America was already well established,” she said. “Now we have found a way to serve families that can be hard to reach and need our support the most.”

To test the viability of the model, five pilot sites were chosen from Volunteers of America local offices and their partner correctional facilities. Representatives from Volunteers of America and the correctional facilities attended a session sponsored by Scholastic to train staff on the reading curriculum. The group continued to work together on policies, implementation procedures and documentation.

“The partnership between a correctional institution, a faith-based organization and a corporation really worked,”

said Margaret Ratcliff, Volunteers of America vice president of service development. “The partners’ resources complement each other.”

Inmates with children 2 to 10 years old are eligible to participate in Words Travel. Correctional facilities typically post notices about the program and check interested offenders’ records for infractions and no-contact orders. Groups of 10 to 15 are selected for the program. Shortly before a session begins, the Volunteers of America local office sends a letter, containing a self-addressed, stamped envelope, to the parent/caregiver, asking permission for the child to receive books, tapes and other supplies from the incarcerated parent as part of the program. As word of the program traveled throughout the sites, some of the partner correctional facilities experienced a backlog of parents waiting to participate and send home carefully chosen books to their children.

## PROGRAM STEPS

There are four main steps to each series of Words Travel classes. They consist of the following:

**Step 1 — Learning.** The first step in the program involves teaching inmates the special skills of “conversational reading” — how best to read aloud to children. Prison participants meet in small groups to study a six-week curriculum adapted from Scholastic’s family literacy kit, *Reading Starts With Us*, by author Ellen Goldsmith. Participants learn the value and appeal of different kinds of children’s literature and develop confidence that they can create enjoyable experiences with books for their children. “Each week, we cover a different genre — folk tales, realistic fiction, poetry, picture books,” said Jennifer Eugene, a program manager who coordinates the Words Travel program for Volunteers of America in western Washington.

**Step 2 — Practicing.** Participants read and talk about the books and practice reading aloud to bring the stories to life. Some participants are initially hesitant to read aloud in front of others, but the environment is supportive and classmates listen respectfully as they test out how to read animatedly for their children. Classroom discussion fosters relationships in the group and each participant functions as a contributing and listening member of the group.

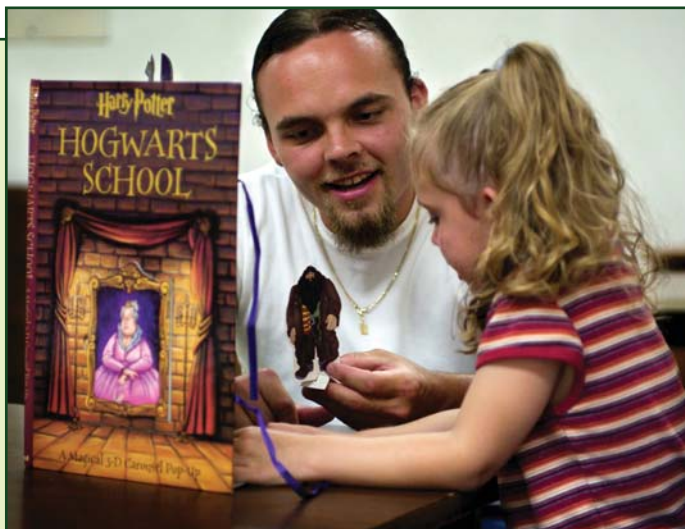
**Step 3 — Book Recording.** Parents then read and record books on tape of their favorite stories. Recording either occurs during class or during a separately scheduled time overseen by the teacher and staff. Staff ensure that any special messages to the children recorded on the tape are appropriate. The tapes are mailed to the children or given to them during visits. The children also receive a backpack containing a copy of the book and a portable tape player and headset. The backpacks often contain school supplies and other items donated from the community for the children.

The children are able to keep the books, tapes and supplies so that they can listen to their parent’s voice and read along as often as they like. Scholastic donated more than 2,500 children’s books to prison parents last year, including specialized titles, such as *Visiting Day*, the story of a child visiting her father in prison.

**Step 4 — Graduation.** At the end of each course, some prisons have a graduation ceremony, while others arrange an extended visit for the newly graduated readers and the children in their families.

Graduates may have the opportunity to continue to be involved with Words Travel by acting as volunteers to assist new program participants with their reading, earning time to record another book for their children themselves.

The program also has fostered other positive and creative outlets for parents to express their love for their children. At some sites, Volunteers of America, correctional



(Left) Jeremiah, a Washington State Prison inmate, helps bring Harry Potter’s world to life for his 4-year-old daughter Kacie.



Photos courtesy Volunteers of America

(Right) As visiting hours come to a close, Jeremiah hugs his daughter.

# Words Travel

## Pilot Sites

The Words Travel family-strengthening and literacy program began at the following five sites.

- Volunteers of America Indiana offers the program in partnership with the Indiana Women's Prison, located in Indianapolis. The prison houses 450 women in a campus-style, maximum-security facility and is committed to encouraging and strengthening the relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children through programs like Words Travel. The initial Words Travel training was held at this pilot site.
- Volunteers of America Western New York operates two Community Corrections Center programs for the U.S. Bureau of Prisons in Rochester and Binghamton, N.Y. The clients are inmates who are completing their sentences in the U.S. prison system. They have been moved from federal prison to the community corrections center in the city where they will eventually be released to help them make a positive transition back into the community. Both men and women are served.
- Volunteers of America Central Ohio provides the Words Travel program at the Sherman School at Chillicothe Correctional Institution in Chillicothe, Ohio. The prison, which is located 50 miles south of Columbus, houses 2,277 male inmates.
- Volunteers of America Spokane provides the Words Travel program at the Airway Heights Correctional Center, a medium-custody correctional facility housing 1,600 men outside of Spokane, Wash.
- Volunteers of America Western Washington provides the Words Travel program at two correctional facilities in western Washington. One is the Washington State Reformatory, a medium-/maximum-security prison for men, located in the rural community of Monroe. The other is the Washington Corrections Center for Women, the only women's prison in the state, serving 750 women, located in the rural community of Gig Harbor.

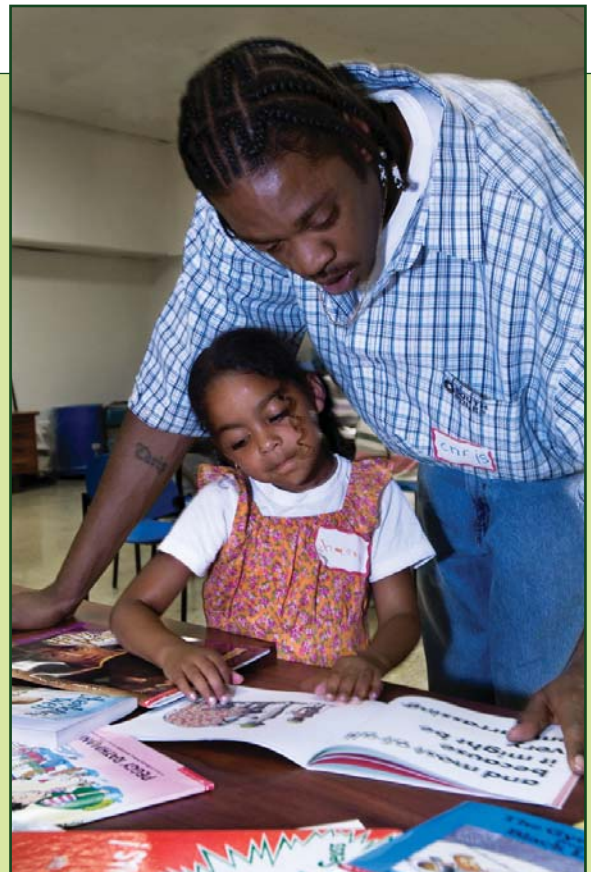
Words  Travel™

facility staff or volunteers facilitate further relationship-building during parent/child visits through arts and crafts activities and other projects based on themes encountered in the stories. Some prison fathers at Monroe have even begun writing and illustrating children's books. Darrell's first homemade picture book, *The Black Princess*, was about his 7-year-old daughter Reneeka's friendship with a young cousin. He is now putting together old family photos for a story about Reneeka's grandfather, who died recently. "Reneeka loves her first book," Darrell said with obvious pride of authorship. "She takes it to school and shows it to her teachers."

### PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

The Words Travel program is composed of several key components:

- Leadership Team — Staff from Volunteers of America and correctional facility sites arrange and provide oversight for the program, including collecting outcome data;
- Teachers — Staff or volunteers are trained in the Words Travel curriculum and conduct classes that meet weekly for six weeks. Teachers may be provided by Volunteers of America or the correctional facility;
- Books — Scholastic provides a selection of books; and



Chris and his daughter Chanell, 5, read together during visitation at the Monroe Correctional Complex in Washington.

- Supplies — Tapes, tape recorders, backpacks and other supplies that Volunteers of America secures in the community with support from Scholastic.

## PROGRAM BENEFITS

When parents have a relationship with their children and share quality time, such as reading together, the children benefit in many ways. “The Words Travel program aids in promoting and preserving the bond between incarcerated mothers and their children with whom they have little contact,” said Indiana Women’s Prison Superintendent Dana Blank. “Being able to hear their mother’s voice while reading a story gives them a sense of security and minimizes the abandonment issues most children of incarcerated mothers experience.”

While the majority of parents in prison are fathers, a growing number are mothers. The Indiana Women’s Prison has graduated several classes since its Words Travel program began in January 2003.

“Women can’t focus on their own rehabilitation when they are worried about their children,” said Mary Leffler, director of program development for Volunteers of America in Indiana. “They feel responsible for what is going on at home.” A mother’s voice — even on tape — is reassuring to both prison moms and their kids, Leffler said.

She related how the husband of one Indiana inmate plays the tapes to soothe their new baby, who was born while his mother was in prison. Meanwhile, the couple’s older children play the tapes almost every night. “The chil-

dren say, ‘It’s like Mom is here with us,’” Leffler said. “That’s what this program is all about.”

And there are other positive benefits such as greater interest in reading and improved reading skills for both parents and children. Darin Goff, program activities manager at Monroe, said most inmates at his facility have poor reading skills, reflecting national statistics that show about 68 percent of prison inmates lack a high school diploma. “We do provide adult education and remedial classes to improve their skills, and a parenting skills class is in the works,” he said. “The Words Travel program touches on both needs. It’s been a great success so far.”

## FUTURE EXPANSION

Words Travel has met with success during the pilot phase, and the program is being readied for replication. Several new sites will open this year and a curriculum will be developed to support more extensive replication. The program is a winning proposition for all. For correctional facilities, it supports parenting and re-entry goals. For Scholastic and Volunteers of America, it supports their commitment to enriching young lives. For incarcerated parents and their children, it builds shared memories and a bridge to the future.

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