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Mothers' Voices Reach Beyond Bars

By Denise Gamino
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Kenzell Williams didn't recognize his mother when she arrived in the mail.

She slipped into the house inside a padded envelope containing a children's book and a cassette tape.

Six-year-old Kenzell lives in Cedar Park with his aunt, Cindy Williams. She put the tape in a little boombox and told Kenzell to listen. A woman's animated voice was reading a book called "The Magic School Bus Gets Ants in its Pants."

"What is that?" Kenzell asked.

"That's your mother," his aunt said.

"It doesn't sound like her," Kenzell said.

"Yes it is. Keep listening."

"Oh yeah. That is her voice!"

The story about schoolchildren on a field trip inside an ant hill ended and Kenzell's mother had a special message for him:

"Kenzell, I hope that you enjoyed the storybook that Mom read to you today. When you get sad, just tell them to turn on the tape and you can listen to my voice. I miss you and I love you, son. Take care."

Kenzell's mother, Sandy Foxworth, 39, can't read to her son in person or even hold him in her lap because she is in a Texas prison serving a 20-year sentence for aggravated assault.

But she gets to read to her son through a novel program run by volunteers in Austin. The Women's Storybook Project of Texas collects new children's books and, once a month, tapes female inmates reading stories to their children or grandchildren who live in the free world.

"It's a very simple idea that has a very big impact," said Judith Dullnig, coordinator of the storybook project. "It's a way for the mother to show her child that she loves them, and introduces literature at the same time."

"We're finding that it's important for the (other) family members to hear from their loved ones. Adults have been listening to it also, as a bonus."

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice supports the program, which operates in two women's prisons and soon will expand to a third. The storybook project helps improve inmates' conduct because only well-behaved prisoners can participate.

"This is a great thing," said Capt. Beverley Wilkins, disciplinary officer at the Murray unit.

The Texas program, modeled after those in other states, started in 2003. About 2,200 books have been taped and mailed to children, some of whom live in other states or countries.

The popularity of the program is obvious at the Lane Murray Unit, one of five women's prisons in Gatesville, 40 miles west of Waco. On a recent Saturday, 23 female inmates in white uniforms line up on the sidewalk outside the prison's locked chapel. They stand in the hot sun, squinting and shifting from foot to foot. Some peek through the glass-door panels as they wait to get in.

Dullnig and five other volunteers inside rearrange chairs in the chapel and nearby meeting rooms. Five reading stations are set up in the center and in each corner of the chapel. Down the hall, several inmates with special privileges help unpack boxes of books and display them on conference tables in a room used as a library.

When the volunteers are ready, a corrections officer unlocks the door and the excited inmates file in.

"Keep the noise down. Talk later," Wilkins barks.

After brief introductions between volunteers and inmates, the prisoners are allowed to mill about the book piles, studying covers and thumbing through the texts. It is a study in quiet contemplation.

Foxworth chooses the book about ant antics for Kenzell because "he loves bugs, and he's a very adventurous child."

"For me to be able to reach out to my son in this manner is so wonderful because it's important my child knows that I do still love him even if I am not there physically," she says. "It's hard to bear the price for what I've caused because I made wrong choices. Although I'm here, he's not forgotten and he must know on a constant basis that he's special."

Foxworth will be eligible for parole in 2012.

Kenzell visits his mother periodically, but inmate Asel Abdygapparova doesn't get to see her children. Her 5-year-old son, Ramon, and 12-year-old daughter, Anel, live in Kazakhstan, one of the former Soviet republics.

Abdygapparova, 31, had left Kazakhstan to pursue a master's degree in statistics in San Antonio. But she was convicted of capital murder last year and sentenced to life in prison for her accomplice role in the kidnapping, rape and murder of a San Antonio single mother who was abducted while waiting to catch a bus to work. Abdygapparova testified that she helped her boyfriend and another man because she feared for her life. Both men now are on death row.

The storybook project worked with the prison chaplain to locate children's books written in Russian. Abdygapparova records a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale for her son and reads a chapter from a lengthier book for her daughter.

"I'm very thankful because in this way they can have access to the tapes and hear me whenever they want to since we don't have visits," she says.

"I never thought I'd be here. It's very hard. I think it feels different for me than other prisoners. They get visits and get to see their kids, and I don't."

Inside the cover of the fair tale, she writes a note to Ramon:

"For my beautiful son from his mom. I love you very much and I always think about you. Be good. Love, Kisses, Mom." She punctuates it with a small heart.

The storybook project is incentive to obey prison rules and stay in line, she says. "I've been trying to be good."

The volunteers allow the prisoners to record personal messages before and after they read the storybook. The messages are supposed to be short, but sometimes allowances are made.

Inmate Cindy Ann Mendoza, 36, picks out books to read to her grandchildren, 4-year-old Isaiah and 2-year-old Josiah. She begins her recording by singing the entire "Happy Birthday" song to "Mr. Josiah."

As she sings, her voice catches and tears fill her eyes. Volunteer Kate Moss from Austin joins in and helps her finish.

"Hi Josiah. It's me, Grandma Mendoza. I want to say Happy Birthday, and I want to say I love you very much," she says on the tape.

She continues to snuffle through tears as she reads, in Spanish, "Donde Viven Los Monstruos" ("Where the Wild Things Are").

Mendoza has been in prison since Valentine's Day in 2000 when she received a life sentence for fatally stabbing her future father-in-law in the home they shared in San Marcos. She said prison has saved her from her past life of alcohol and drug abuse.

"I was a mom always drinking and doing drugs and wasn't there like I should have been" for her son and daughter, she says. "Now I can be there for my grandchildren, maybe not physically but through the books and correspondence. I have a chance now to be at least a grandma.

"It is a privilege for me to be able to read to my grandsons considering my life sentence. I pray that the Lord opens more opportunities for the grandmothers in similar situations as mine. Yes, we made mistakes and poor choices. But we still love our babies so much, regardless."

The storybook project volunteers receive steady feedback from children and relatives of the inmates. Children kiss the tapes, carry them to bed and fall asleep as the tapes play, the volunteers are told.

"Dear whoever gets this note," one letter began. "Please let my mom,

Gina, keep reading the books on tape. One more thing, I love hearing her voice. By Cameron."

And in Cedar Park, Kenzell smiles and taps his toes as he sits on the living room couch while listening to his mother read him the story about ants.

"I want to go see my mom," he says when the tape ends.

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