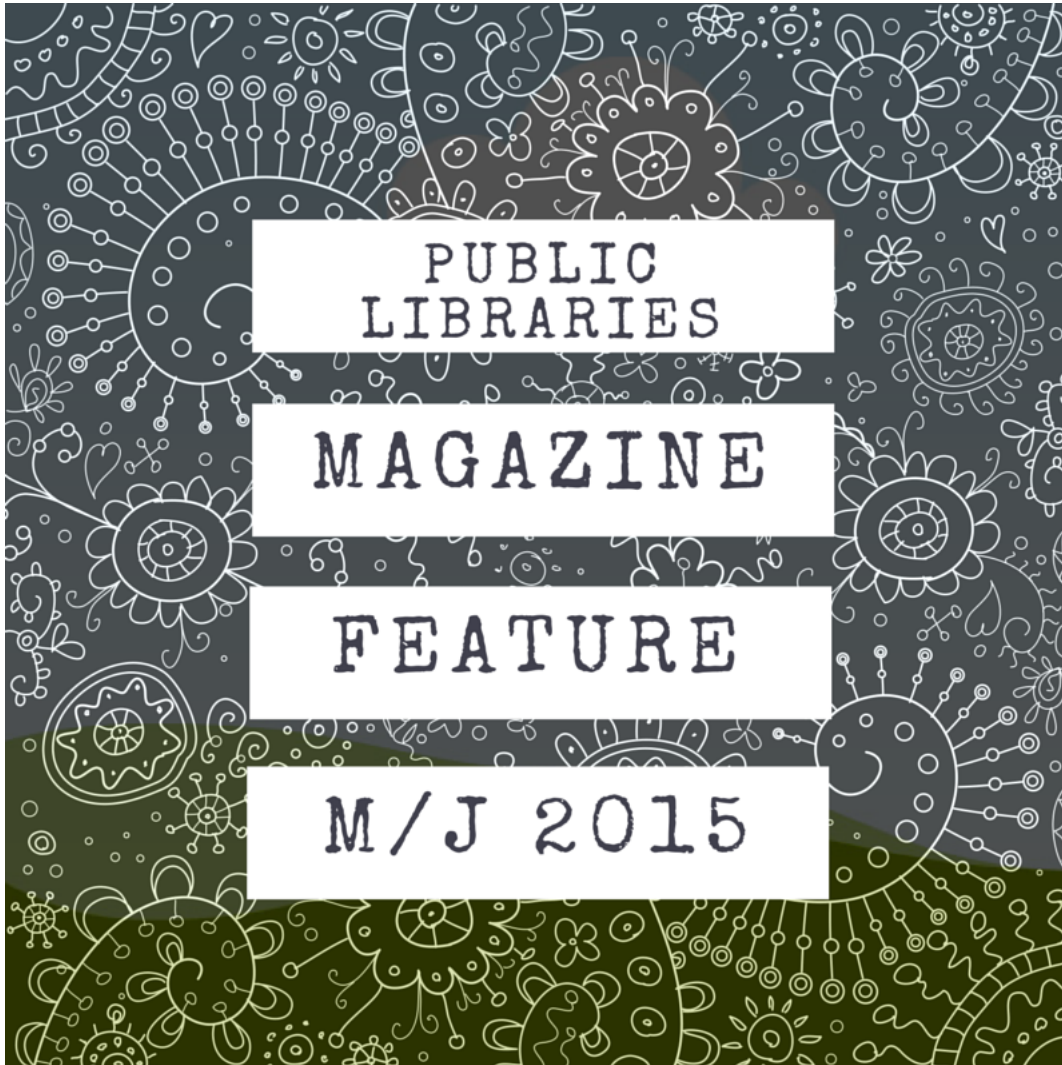


Comparing Notes A Conversation about Library Service to County Jails



by Dustin Fife and Kim Fong on June 16, 2015

In this informal discussion, the authors share their experiences and ideas about working with and in local jail systems.

Dustin Fife (DF): Kim Fong, you've changed my life! Some time ago we talked about your experiences as the librarian for Salt Lake County (Utah) Jail and I was inspired. It took some time to digest, but two months ago my library, the San Juan County (Utah) Library (SJCL) began providing library services for our small county jail, which houses about 100 inmates. It is one of the most fulfilling and gratifying things I have ever done. Everyone needs a self-esteem boost from time to time, and I'll tell you this, every time I work at the jail it is a huge boost. I have never been showered with so much gratitude in my life.

Before we began our library services, the jail had only a few thousand old and threadbare titles. There were no Spanish-language materials, though several inmates speak almost no English, and no new titles were being purchased. With that in mind, our new patrons are ecstatic to have access to the public library's collection and services.

I thought it would be hard to get this program approved, but both the county sheriff and jail commander were immensely helpful. They both love programming and hope that the new library will help lower recidivism and increase quality of life. The program has rolled out smoothly and has felt like an important success for SJCL.

My question to you is where do I go from here? What else should I try at the jail? What worked and didn't work for you? Is it strange to feel so inspired by inmates?

Kim Fong (KF): I know that library service at the jail is very fulfilling, because the patrons are so grateful and appreciative of the service. I've never been in a library job where I got standing ovations for bringing books into the unit—until I started working in the jail. It is very rewarding, but it is also very easy to pat yourself on the back and think that everything is great because you have such an appreciative audience. It's easy to look great when you consider the conditions of the library before you started providing service.

So now the really interesting part begins! What kind of materials are you providing to the prisoners? Are you buying materials that will really appeal to them or are you using "leftovers" from your regular collection? When I first started at the jail, I was surprised by the patron's interest in a wide variety of topics and genres. There really is no "stereotypical" prisoner when it comes to reading tastes. I also think it is important to get a feel for what they are really interested in reading, instead of what would be "good for them" to read. Put preconceived notions out the window and really take a look at what your patrons want. You'll notice that I use the word want and not the word need. If you get too caught up in need, you will fall into the trap of deciding what is best for your patron.

When you start providing materials that your patrons really want, you may run into resistance from jail staff. Many are of the mindset that prisoners should not have access to certain types of books. You want to have a very clear selection policy in place, so that you can back yourself up when materials are challenged. The selection policy that I used at the Salt Lake County Jail Library specifically addressed certain issues that came up fairly often. We tried to limit the amount of items that couldn't be in the library.

Here are the questions I asked myself as I considered books to buy: Will this book compromise the security of the jail? Will this book teach skills that could make the reader a threat to officers, other prisoners, or himself? With those questions in mind, there were some nonfiction topics that were not in the library, including martial arts, bomb making, drug making, boxing techniques, etc. However (and this is important), just because a book mentions some of these topics, it doesn't automatically exclude it from the collection. A fictional depiction of a ninja fight does not rise to the level of compromising security.

I had many challenges to books, but I rarely removed them from the collection. What were some of the things that were challenged? Books on Asatru (which is a popular religion with white supremacists), urban literature, mysteries with descriptions of violence, books with sex scenes, graphic novels, and the list goes on, but I think you get the picture. Plan ahead, so when you experience challenges, you will know what to do. You have a great opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of the patrons you serve.

DF: I'm still in the honeymoon phase, but you are right, it is probably time for me to stop patting myself on the back. You have given me some important things to consider. In regards to collection development, our system is quite simple; I treat them like I do every other patron in San Juan County. Our jail is small and maxes out at 110 inmates, so we don't actually keep any of the books at the jail. We bring the books from our library branches. That wouldn't have worked for you since you were working with thousands of people at Salt Lake County Jail, but it is a fluid process for us. What that really means though is that I spend most of my time at the jail doing reference and readers' advisory. We talk about what they want and I see what we have. Just like with any other patron, if we do not have what they want or something that will suffice, I consider their requests and either purchase something for the county collection or interlibrary loan a book for them.

My jail's population is unique, and that leads me to some tough professional decisions. I really love the questions you asked yourself when working on collection development. Eighty percent of the jail population here are state inmates who are sex offenders. They are here to be part of a special program to work with therapists before they are released from jail. It is safe to say that every single inmate at the San Juan County Jail will someday reenter society. The therapists have asked that we restrict materials that might exacerbate their addictions. This is a difficult thing for me because censorship is such a battle, but I have to respect the therapists' wishes in this situation or there will be no library services at all. It is an important service that will hopefully help inmates transition smoothly back into our world. The therapists know that we do not read everything and that we withhold our personal judgments as much as possible, however, they have asked if I have any questions that I consult with them. I do not have to tell the therapists the titles or names, they are just available for discussion. This has come up once so far. I purchased a drawing book that I didn't hesitate to put in the county's collection, but felt unsure about for the jail. I told the inmate about my concerns and he quickly assured me that he did not want it if I felt at all unsure. It was a positive experience for both me and the inmate, but I am trying to limit subjective judgments as much as possible. However, I still feel on shaky ground with such vague guidelines. Have I compromised myself professionally?

What about programming? How do I move beyond just circulating materials? They have a great education center and many of them are finishing degrees and certificates, but what should I attempt to add to this environment? What worked best for you, what were some of your successes?

KF: Programming in a jail setting can be very challenging, especially if the prisoners are already in educational programs that take a lot of their time. One program that I found very successful was an introduction to the library. This presentation was given in conjunction with the life skills class that the jail conducted. In this class, I would show students the library website, teach them how to do catalog searches, demonstrate some key databases and have them fill out a library card application. I made sure that each person had a library card in their property, so when they were released, they could visit the library and put their card to work. I think that this program was especially useful, because many of the prisoners were only familiar with the jail library and hadn't been in a library on the outside in years. Even those that were generally familiar with libraries had no idea that so much online information was available through the library website. Keeping in

mind their interests and needs, I would generally share a database that helps with test prep, since so many are working on GEDs or other certifications. I showed them a reliable job search site and they were always very excited about the car repair database.

Another successful program was a book club. This was conducted in a traditional way—although many of the discussions were far from traditional! I also stuck to the traditional demographic for book clubs—women. I used a compressed timeline because women seem to be out of jail faster than men. I would go out to a unit and sign people up for the club. Then I would return the same day with the book. Inside the book, I would have a reminder of when we would meet—usually the following week. When the time came for the meeting, they had usually finished the book and were ready to discuss. I was amazed by their openness about their situations and lives in general. We talked about prostitution, drug addiction, losing their children to foster care, rape, and child abuse. This was certainly not for the faint of heart! I think that they appreciated an open forum to talk about the books and also about the things in their own lives that they thought about while reading the books. It certainly opened my eyes to the very difficult circumstances of some women's lives.

We also had a summer reading program at the jail. There were small incentives for reading a certain number of books and the prisoners were very excited about participating. The prizes had to be approved by jail administration, so that no security risks were involved. The prizes were small—bookmarks, golf pencils, and erasers—but very appreciated. We had large numbers of participants and finishers. It was extremely successful!

I think the best way to have successful programs is to get jail administration behind you. Their willingness will make or break your programs. The other thing to remember is to be flexible. Lockdowns will sometimes mess up your schedule. Or lunch being late. Or a security incident. Or any number of other things for which you have no control. Take it in stride and work out ways to reschedule. Programming is challenging, but worth it! You will look at the world in a different way after interacting with prisoners this way.

DF: I love that you put a library card in their possession. Hopefully they were able to seamlessly reintegrate into the Salt Lake County Library. It is a perfect continuation of services, “come to the library at the jail and keep going to the library when you get out of jail!” I think it will be a major resource for the inmates as they use the libraries and the skills you taught them. Your thoughts on flexibility are also appreciated. I am coming to understand that you cannot avoid counts, lunch, inmate breakdowns, and general interruptions. But, when you think about it, how different is that from every other library? I spent two hours last week getting a bird out of a sewer grate, and I promise, I had not scheduled time for that.

I'm excited to get started with programming. I have been including the inmates in our One County One Book program, but I hope to start a jail-specific book club in the near future. I have circulated a large amount of drawing books, so I was also considering a library drawing contest. I will definitely seek the support of jail administration before moving ahead with any program. It is a different dynamic than I am used to, asking permission and such, but the jail administration seems to genuinely care about the rehabilitation of the inmates and the success of the library.

I wanted to get your thoughts on outreach and service diversification because I really feel like we are doing both. The new jail program in San Juan County feels sustainable and expandable. After just a few months it is clear that the program is a great boon to the library system. We have garnered positive attention from local officials and residents alike and our circulation has risen from the new patrons. It is a new visible way that we are serving San Juan County residents and it is also a group that was not being reached before (often from minority or poorer socioeconomic backgrounds).

Resources for inmates not only improve the quality of their lives, but drastically help curb recidivism. It feels like a win-win-win. We have diversified our service and created outreach with a new program and partners. The most interesting part of it is that this is your grandmother's librarianship. I spend most of my time doing reference and readers' advisory!

KF: I'm really glad that you are enjoying your jail experience! Jail libraries may be the last bastion of old-fashioned librarianship. It is all about the books. Reference and readers' advisory skills get honed in a completely different way when your patrons don't have access to the Internet.

I want to broach the subject of recidivism. I don't want to burst your bubble, but I also don't want you to have an unrealistic expectation of what happens when people get out of jail. I think that your situation with prisoners that are getting specific therapy and programs to help them be more successful may make the outcome different, but you need to know that recidivism is a real problem for incarcerated individuals. You will face disappointment as you see people coming back again and again—despite your best efforts to give them the resources and skills that could change their lives. I employed many female prisoners in my library. They were smart and capable. They were learning a marketable skill—shelving books. They were often avid readers. They were getting off the drugs and alcohol. I had high hopes for many of them. And the vast majority (around 75 percent) came back to jail.¹

When I say that I found fulfillment in changing people's lives, I didn't mean that I was helping to make a permanent change. Given the circumstances that many prisoners face when they are released, a permanent change is not very likely. BUT, I did change their lives while they were in jail. As you know, jail is a dismal, mind-numbing place. People could spend hours staring at the walls or they could find a way to escape those walls by reading. I can't count the number of times someone told me that they had never read a book all the way through until they started reading in jail. Those stories warm my heart and I believe many of those people will become lifelong readers. But they may do most of their reading during their frequent visits to jail! I hope this is not too depressing, but I think the reality of the situation should be addressed.

DF: Not depressing at all, a realistic view is important. An inmate requested a book the other day that he first read in juvenile detention. He told me that he stays out of jail longer when he reads this particular book. Let me be optimistic about your pessimism though; changing their lives in jail is changing their lives. For more than two million people in the United States at a time, incarceration is life. Maybe they will come back two or three more times, or maybe they won't, but we are still creating opportunities for individuals and the community. That is what it is all about. You cannot make someone come to the library, you cannot make them use your digital media lab, you cannot create a book club without them, but we can continue to try and create opportunities. You created opportunities for people to become lifelong readers. You created opportunities for inmates to connect through book clubs. You helped people learn skills and you gave them a pass to libraries with a full gamut of services for when they got out. I have loved working with the inmates, but it is about so much more than one under-served population. Who else are we missing? Who else can we easily help? I keep thinking about how easy it was to start this program. I just had to ASK! People have gone out of their way to help establish the jail library because they know it benefits our community. I know we have limited resources, but maybe we aren't asking enough for those either. Are we asking for help from everyone who is willing to help? I'll give you the final thought on this Kim; any last words of advice?

KF: There is one final caution that I would like to give you. You may not have experienced it yet, but you will have jail officers ask you for information about what individual prisoners are checking out. Officers are often of the opinion that prisoners don't have any privacy rights, but they do!

In Utah, any library that is funded by public funds must adhere to Government Records Access and Management Act (GRAMA) rules.² If an officer wants information about a prisoner's loan history, they have to go through the same legal process as they would at any other library. I experienced incidences of anger and retaliation from officers when I wouldn't give them the information they wanted. They didn't really understand that I would be breaking the law to give them that information. A talk with jail administration or superior officers usually remedied the situation, but it was never a pleasant experience.

But, on to more philosophical musings. I think that public libraries spend a lot of time talking about serving under-represented populations, but they don't always know how to do it. I think your willingness to ask is something that all of us need to emulate. Maybe we don't have a jail in our area, but there are other people that we aren't reaching. How do we find them? What will entice them to try the library? What barriers have we set up to library use? All of those questions are ones that we should be constantly asking ourselves and we should experiment with ways to reach people that would truly benefit from what we have to offer.

I have talked to many librarians over the years about my work at the jail library. One of the most common responses was "I would never do that!" That makes me sad, because I think that they are really missing out on a wonderful opportunity. I'm glad that you took the plunge and are enjoying one of the most rewarding library experiences ever. I do believe that we should all go to jail and if most librarians gave it a try, they would never want to leave.

References

1. Salt Lake County (Utah) Sheriff's Office, Jail Programs Division, 2010 Annual Report, "Comparative Recidivism Rates of Prisoners Released in 2007," p. 18, accessed May 13, 2015.
2. "GRAMA Rules," Utah's Right to Know, accessed May 13, 2015.

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