

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Storybook recordings keep incarcerated mothers, grandmothers connected with children

JACKSON, MISS. – Maranda Roberts was incarcerated when her 5-year-old daughter was only a few weeks old, but her voice should be as familiar to her daughter as though they were never separated.

Rebecca Holifield also has been able to maintain a relationship with her children through her voice, and so have so many other mothers as well as grandmothers at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF), thanks to a voice recording project that began decades ago.

“The Storybook Project is another way the Mississippi Department of Corrections promotes family reunification,” Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “We know how important maintaining family contact is for successful re-entry.”

Stories are read and recorded by incarcerated parents and the recordings are burned to a CD. The CD is then mailed to their children. Written notes also can be mailed to each child along with the book and CD. The incarcerated adults are able to not only parent, but also promote literacy from a distance.

“It is wonderful to have this opportunity because my daughter and son love to read and they look forward to getting the books and my recordings,” Holifield, 34, said during a Storybook Project session this year. “It eases the burden of my being here and keeps us feeling closer together. My son (12) loves the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series and my daughter (10) loves Amelia Bedelia (books). I am looking forward to reading to them in person next year after my release.”

Roberts, 28, said participating in the project was a wonderful opportunity. “I want her to hear my voice,” she said of her daughter. “I hope she enjoys the book I picked.”

The Storybook Project, based on a similar program from Wisconsin, operates through volunteer churches, with Grace Episcopal Church in Canton serving as lead. Volunteers also come from churches including St. Philip’s Episcopal Church and St. James’ Episcopal Church, both in Jackson, St. Peter’s by-the-Lake in Brandon, and the Episcopal Church of the Creator in Clinton.

“It’s a real privilege to help these offenders maintain a connection with their families,” said the Rev. Beth Foose, priest and rector of Grace Church. “We started with mothers at first and expanded to grandmothers about 20 years ago. Many of the children who receive their materials are in Mississippi, but not necessarily. We have some going across the country.”

The Storybook Project’s multi-denominational volunteers visit CMCF twice a year, with more than 100 incarcerated adults participating each session. For example, in April, there were 155 participants. In August, there were 120.

Each participant can pick from a wide variety of 400 to 500 children’s books. The incarcerated adult then finds a spot to be alone within a designated area at CMCF and reads the books into a digital recorder. The recorder is taken to a volunteer who burns the recording on a CD. Materials are usually shipped to the recipients within a week.

“We have seen a great response, and we couldn’t do it without our volunteers who come with us and those who are in the prison,” the Rev. Foose said. “They are taking time from their usual jobs and routines to be a part of this.”

Jackie Morgan, a volunteer assisting with a recent Storybook Project’s visit, said plans are underway to possibly change from using digital recorders to using the Internet. “It is one small thing we can do for them by bringing a ray of light into their experience in prison,” Morgan said.

Using Cloud Internet services might make the program more accessible to children since finding CD players is becoming increasingly difficult, the Rev. Foose said.

Participants must have children or grandchildren under the age of 13. They must have one year or more left to serve and cannot have a current or prior sex offense.

Cassandra Younger participated in the program last year and this year. “The kids can’t wait to get their stories,” Younger said. “They’re excited. I’m excited, too, and grateful.”

Patricia Wilhite’s family has grown since her incarceration more than 21 years ago. She now has a great-granddaughter. “I got to read her first book to her when she was only a day old,” Wilhite, 68, said. “There is not a lot I can do in here, but it is really neat to read to my first great-grandchild.”

Another Storybook Project is being planned for Nov. 8.

“We were able to add a third session for the women this year,” said CMCF Associate Warden LeTunya Coleman, who supervises the project.

The Rev. Foose thanked the volunteers, Coleman, and other CMCF staff assisting with the program. “The mutual respect between the inmates and the warden makes our work easy,” she said. “We generally have the same group of dedicated women. They come ready to work with smiles, skills, laughter, and kindness. I always leave Storybook days feeling better about the world.”