

Transcript – Books to Prisoners Interview (uploaded to SoundCloud, 2011)

Announcer: Now back to your volunteer-powered, community-centered One World Report.

Jordan Corneliuson: “Welcome back. I’m Jordan Corneliuson. Seattle is home to a great many nonprofit organizations. Today, we look at one group with a unique mission. Since the 1970s, the northwest nonprofit Books to Prisoners has been sending books to prisoners all over the United States. The group is about to begin its winter holiday fundraising season to raise money to support its mission. One World Report Executive Producer Joaquin Weese (?) spoke with the organization’s president Andy Chan about the group and its work.”

Joaquin Weese: “Andy, thanks so much for coming in today.”

Andy Chan: “Thank you for inviting me.”

JW: “Tell me about the history of the organization, how it got started in the 1970s.”

AC: “Actually, the entire story is somewhat lost in the mists of time. The organization definitely started on or before 1973 by some of the people who also went on to establish Left Bank Books, the bookstore in Pike Place Market, and originally started out as very much a political prisoners support group for people like the Black Panthers, things like that. Since then, we decided to provide books for people outside of the political realm. It’s pretty neutral, politically, these days. Um, and

basically has gone from strength to strength over the last almost four decades.”

JW: “Books to Prisoners is just based in Seattle? And it just provides books to Washington-based prisoners? Or what is the breadth and width of the services you provide?”

AC: “The primary group is based in Seattle. We do have some sister organizations based in Bellingham, Olympia, and Portland. They get letters from us, although they are financially independent and organizationally fairly independent. We send books to prisoners all over the United States. The only state that we don’t currently send to is California—at least to male prisoners in California—and that was a financial decision that we made a few years ago. We just couldn’t afford to serve all the prisoners who were sending in (requests for books) and unfortunately, California was just the right size to cut out.”

JW: “How difficult is it to actually send books inside prisons?”

AC: “It varies wildly. Some states, relatively easy. One of the surprising ones is Texas.”

JW: “Really?”

AC: “Uh, yeah [laughs], as long as you aren’t sending in anything sexual, any nudity, and, you know, within their rough guidelines, they will accept any format, pretty much. Hardback, paperback, new books, used books. They’re good with that. On the other side, you’ve got states like North Carolina. Extraordinarily difficult to get into. A lot of the prisons—state

prisons—there will only allow books from the publisher. Of the actual book. And, of course, almost no publishers will actually want to do the kind of retail, sending in, of books to prisoners. Another difficult one to get into is Michigan. We are not an approved vendor. Some states have specific approved vendors like Amazon or Barnes & Noble and they will not accept books from any other source. Unfortunately, Washington, at least historically, has been one of the more difficult states for us to get into and the primary reason for that is that they've only allowed new books. And us, being a very low-income organization, we don't have the finances to buy new books. You know, almost all of our books are donated, and they are donated as used books. We've been working on this for some time. We're just not sure why it makes sense that we can only send new books into a place. And in January of 2009, the Department of Corrections did agree to allow us to send used books into certain, small, low-security prisons, and this year, earlier on in 2010, they allowed us to send used books into one larger prison, the one at Stafford Creek in Aberdeen, as a kind of a test case. We hope by the end of the year that we will have proved that, uh, sending in used books is not any kind of security risk and therefore will be able to send used books into all Washington State prisons.”

JW: “How do you fundraise as an organization? I imagine it must be difficult to ask individuals to donate to a group that is a service for people within the prison system.”

AC: “Sure. There's lots of different levels of why it's difficult to fundraise for Books to Prisoners. One is that we are a pretty small organization with a fairly small budget and so, national funders are often not interested in an organization that small. On

the other hand, a lot of local org funders are not interested in organizations which have a national kind of purview, which is what we do. So it is difficult to get grants in many cases. Through most of our history, almost all of our funds has come through individual donations. We...either completely unsolicited or through a mailing list and so on. Over the years, we've managed to accrue a certain number of very generous annual donors. Very occasionally, we will get a grant. In—uh, I forget, it was 2008—we got a grant of something like \$20,000, which made an enormous difference. The three or four previous years, we had not got any grant money whatsoever and had entirely run on either individual donations or, occasionally, we will do fundraisers. A few years ago, we had Alice Walker do a talk for us at Town Hall, and that was a big one for us. Um, we've had two art auctions which have also raised a few thousand dollars. But yeah, it's a constant struggle to find the funds.”

JW: “And then, my next question is what is your response to those critics who claim that people who have been convicted of a crime don't deserve books.”

AC: “Yeah, I mean, if you believe that prison is only about punishment and you want to make it as bad for the people as possible, there's nothing I'm going to say which is going to persuade you that sending books to prisoners is of any value whatsoever. However, if you believe, you know, on the one hand, that prison is in some way supposed to be of a reformatory nature, there is obviously value in sending educational, empowering books to people so that they're not simply influence by other prisoners around them, that they are getting external influences and having external support so that they're

not coming out meaner or more alienated than when they went in. If you give them an option to learn, to be interested, to be educated, they can take that opportunity. We also, for the most part, believe that there is an intrinsic value in reading, in books, and in being humanitarian. We get letters from prisoners who say they have burned bridges with all of their family, all of their support network, and they are just blown away that someone who doesn't even know them on the outside is willing to take some of the time of their day to do something for a complete stranger. Again, it's something which can rekindle their belief in at least a decent human nature out there somewhere."

JW: "Give me the examples of the people who volunteer for your organization, Books to Prisoners. Why are they there?"

AC: "The motivations for folks is as wide as you can possibly imagine. It used to be that Books to Prisoners, as I said, was a very political organization. When I first started back in 1994, it was still rather dominated by sort of squatters and punks and anarchists, and nowadays the breadth of volunteers is amazing. We have...all of our core volunteers are daytime workers who volunteer their services in the evenings and weekends to keep the place running. I mean, the organization is all volunteer. There's no paid people doing this. In terms of the drop-in volunteers, we have a lot of students from the University of Washington. We actually have a relationship with the service learning program at the Carlson Center at the University of Washington. Similarly, we have a working relationship with Shoreline Community College Service Learning Program [overlapping audio]. During the summer, we have large groups of youth volunteers from Mercer Island VOICE program, and

we also get a pretty large number of people needing to do their court-ordered community service, as well as just regular people dropping in, you know.”

JW: “There are prisons that exist who have libraries, right?”

AC: “That is correct, yeah.”

JW: “And so what does that situation look like? Why do you feel the need, or why does this organization exist to send books directly to prisoners, when couldn’t you just, uh, send books to prisoner libraries? Tell me more about that.”

AC: “Yeah, yeah, well...if prison libraries were effective, then there would be absolutely no reason for Books to Prisoners to exist. You know, I’d be the first person to sort of want to disband Books to Prisoners, if there were sufficient prison libraries. But the fact is that there aren’t. States will vary in how well they fund it—or not. Um, I have an example of a letter from a Tennessee librarian—Tennessee prison librarian—mentioning how they had completely cut the entire budget for purchasing books to the Tennessee prisons and that’s not an isolated kind of situation. And we get so many letters from prisoners saying, you know, my prison library has not had any new books in the last thirty years, they’re all dog-eared, they’re falling apart, pages are missing. They won’t spend money. It’s the lowest priority, or one of the lowest priorities in the prison system right now is buying books and things like that. So yeah, if we didn’t need to exist we really wouldn’t.”

JW: “I’m curious, Andy, you mentioned that you got involved

with the organization in 1994. Tell me, how did you get involved and why have you stuck around for so long?”

AC: “When I first moved to America, I just needed something meaningful to do. I stopped in at Left Bank Books and asked them, and they said, well, you should try Books to Prisoners. They always need volunteers, and it’s true. Why I stuck around? You know, prisoners—as you kind of intimated earlier—are far from the most sympathetic group that you could possibly be serving. And that’s the main reason why I have stuck around; that I could be at the cat shelter, working with orphans, or those other kinds of things. But I think I’m more needed in an organization which works for people who tend not to be the most popular folks in society. They need my help more than anyone else does, I think.”

JW: “Do you have any fundraising events or anything coming up that we should be aware of?”

AC: “We are just going to be starting our holiday season fundraising drive in less than a month, and a long-time donor in Florida has actually offered us \$10,000 as a matching grant, which he will match at a 1:2 ratio. So if someone donates \$10 to us, he’s going to donate \$20 to us, up to \$10,000. That’s where we’re hopefully going to make most of our budget for 2011.”

JW: “Has anyone in your organization actually met some of the folks that they’ve served when they’ve come out?”

AC: “A few of the former prisoners have stopped by just to say thank you and, you know, to volunteer for an evening. We get

messages several times that people have come in to say, you know, it made such a difference to them. Some of the most touching stuff, of course, is the letters from folks who have, uh, sent them after they've got out. It's all very well saying thank you for the books when you're in the prison and, who knows, maybe you're angling to get more books later on. But it's another thing when you're actually out and you've got a million things that you want to do and you haven't been able to do for five, ten, twenty years, to actually write a letter and sometimes enclose, you know, a pretty decent check, to say thank you. That's the kind of thing that we get that is really very motivating."

JW: "Andy, is there anything else that you wanted to add that I missed?"

AC: "Please come and volunteer for us! We're open on, uh, Monday and Tuesday evenings, and if you drop me an email, I can give you instructions on where to find us."

JW: "We will certainly link to your website at our website, oneworldreport.org. Again, I've been speaking with Andy Chan. He's the president of the Seattle-based nonprofit Books to Prisoners. Andy, again, thank you so much for coming in today."

AC: "Thank you."