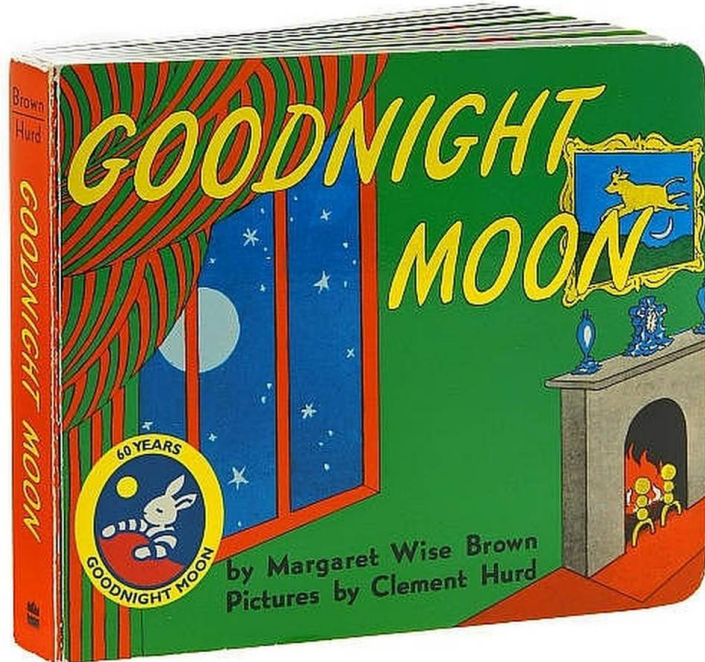


How SC program helps prison moms, kids connect through books



BY SALLEY MCINERNEY
Contributing columnist

Past the tall fences and concertina wire at Graham Correctional Institution in Columbia, past the guard-laden checkpoints and plastic bins where you have to deposit car keys and big-buckled belts before going through metal detectors – yes, past all that – there is a room.

It is called “the warden’s conference room.” A long, unremarkable table takes up most of the space. A tiny Christmas tree – no taller than a coffee pot – adorns the table. It leans a little to the left and is decorated with a tiny strand of red beads. It is too small for the vast, flat space.

Graham is a state prison that houses women in South Carolina.

I am here to meet Crystal. She is 25 years old. Her skin is the color of coffee ice cream. She wears a blue chambray shirt and a long-sleeved undershirt. Her pants are blue, with a wide white stripe down the side of each leg. Her shoes are those plastic “Cros” people wear when they garden.

We sit at one end of the long table. At the outset of our conversation, we deal with the elephant in the room. She is not sure what that expression means. I explain as best I can. It’s the thing that nobody wants to talk about but is there anyway. Sitting between us.

Crystal does not toy with the elephant.

“Second degree burglary and grand larceny,” she says. “I was hanging with the wrong people. I ended up getting in trouble with them.”

OK, elephant dealt with.

Now, on to the reason for my visit.

A book sits on the table. “Good Night Moon.” A classic bedtime story for children, written by Margaret Wise Brown and published in 1947.

Crystal is not familiar with the book, but she looks through the pages, admiring the artwork, smiling.

Smiling because she is about to read it to her two young daughters, 3 years old and 2 years old.

What? you ask. Crystal’s children are not here in this place surrounded by concertina wire, sitting at a long table decorated by a way too small Christmas tree.



No, they are not, so let me explain.

Crystal is about to read the book, recording her voice into it as she turns the pages. Then, the book, with her recorded voice a part of it, will be sent to her girls, who are living with Crystal's mother. When the girls open the book, they will hear their mother's voice reading the bedtime story to them.

The recorded book is part of a project called "A Mother's Voice," which began earlier this year in the state's two female prisons. It is the end result of work at the Richard Riley Diversity Institute, based at Furman University, where groups of people from across the state are chosen to network and begin programs that promote social and racial equality. Groups choose "Capstone Projects." A recent group – including member Bryan Stirling, director of the state Department of Corrections – chose to provide female inmates who met certain criteria, including good behavior while in prison, with recordable books which are sent home to their children.

"When a parent is incarcerated," Stirling said, "the children pay for it. I want to keep a connection between the offender and the family. Mainly what I wanted to do was let the children know that their parent still cared for them."

Stirling said 25 women, incarcerated at the Graham facility, were selected to record the first books, discounted by Sheridan's Hallmark store in Camden and purchased with a \$1,500 grant from Michelin. Additional books have been donated and recorded by inmates at Leath Correctional Institution in Greenwood.

"When we told the inmates, 'You've been chosen to participate...,' some of them started crying."

So, maybe another elephant in the room.

Do these mothers deserve a program like this, considering they have committed crimes?

"The children didn't," Stirling said.

Crystal and I talk for a few more minutes before she records her book.

She, a single mother, has chosen not to let her daughters visit her at prison.

"They think I'm at school. It was hard, heartbreaking, but I had to do what I had to do. This isn't a place for my children to see me. Most children I see who come here, they are upset when their parent doesn't walk back out that door with them. I think about my girls every day, all day. They are my life line. The oldest is entertaining. She loves to read. The youngest, she is like me. She's energetic. She's goofy. She loves to smile. My mama says they have gotten bigger and that they are speaking in complete sentences now."

Crystal says she has learned some things since being in prison.

"Self-discipline, patience. I'm giving myself time to grow and learn from my mistakes. I write poetry, songs. I read books by T.D. Jakes. Inspirational things, anything positive or spiritual."

Or a bedtime story. Like "Good Night Moon."

"I'm so excited," Crystal says, studying the recordable book's directions. "My girls are going to hear my voice. It has to be perfect."

Crystal clears her throat, opens the book, presses the RECORD button and begins.

"In the great green room there was a telephone and a red balloon and a picture of a cow jumping over the moon..."

Crystal reads carefully, slowly, pronouncing each word. All the way to the last page.

"... Good night, little house. Good night, mouse. Good night, comb. Good night, brush. Good night, nobody. Good night, mush. Good night to the old lady whispering 'Hush.' Good night, stars. Good night, air. Good night, noises everywhere."

Crystal closes the book carefully, as if it might break. She wipes away tears. She takes a deep breath and composes herself.

"I miss them so much, but I know they are going to be happy to hear my voice. Thank y'all."

A smile then steals across her face, replacing the tears.

It's the kind of smile that stretches beyond the burglary, the running around with the wrong people and the prison sentence.

It's the kind of smile that slips past the warden's conference room and the unremarkable table and the tiny Christmas tree no taller than a coffee pot.

It's the kind of smile that grows bigger and bigger, stealing over the tall fences and the concertina wire, past the guard-laden checkpoints and plastic bins where you have to deposit your car keys and big-buckled belts before going through metal detectors.

It's the kind of smile that fathoms two little girls reading a bedtime story and hearing their mother's voice.

BY THE NUMBERS

The following information about the female inmate population in South Carolina, as well as the United States, was provided by the SC Department of Corrections. Some of the information the state corrections department provided came through the U.S. Department of Justice. As of early December.

1,460 SC female inmates

33 Average age

44 Percentage without a high school degree or GED

9.5 Average years of prison sentences they're serving

80 Percentage of female inmates with children

More facts

- The "leading most serious offenses" these women have been convicted of are "dangerous drugs" (20 percent); homicide (19 percent); larceny (11 percent); burglary (8 percent); and robbery (7 percent).
- The top five "committing counties" are Spartanburg (14 percent); Greenville (10 percent); Horry (8 percent); Lexington (6 percent); and York (5 percent).
- National studies show that separation from their children is one of the most difficult aspects of incarceration for women, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.
- Further information from the Justice Department notes that nationally "the number of children under age 18 with a mother in prison has more than doubled since 1991, up 131 percent. Currently incarcerated women are mothers to more than 250,000 children, the majority under 18."
- The average age of these children is 8. More than 50 percent of these mothers reported living with their children at the time of, or the month before, their arrests. Seventy-seven percent of jailed mothers were their children's primary caregivers and more than 60 percent of incarcerated mothers are in prisons more than 100 miles from their children, making visitation difficult.
- A final note about the state of female prisoners in South Carolina, provided by a member of the "A Mother's Voice" Capstone Project: Female inmates are far less likely to have money put into their prison spending accounts by their family, making it almost impossible for them to afford the cost of recordable books – which retail at about \$30 a piece - thus the necessity that the books be donated.

Salley McInerney



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