

# Reading program keeps prisoners, families connected

## Elizabeth Fry aims to lessen stigma of having a parent in jail

BY ZOEMCKNIGHT, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 16, 2012

Stella Rose Wallace often reads aloud to her four daughters, five grandsons and great-grandson. Together they've been through *The Hunger Games*, *The Vinyl Princess*, National Geographic fact books and stories about aboriginal heroes. There's just one detail that separates her from other grandmas doing the same: she's in jail.

Wallace, 50, has been living at the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, a medium-security facility in Maple Ridge, for seven months on shoplifting charges. Her sentence ends on Aug. 9.

In the meantime, Wallace stays close to her extended family in part with the help of the Elizabeth Fry Society's Storybook Program, which allows inmates to record themselves reading books aloud. A CD is then sent to the child or grand-child, along with a copy of the book so they can read along.

"It helps me instil the value of reading even though I'm inside," Wallace said. "My voice is there and my presence is still there with them. They can listen to it whenever they want - I'm told they listen to it over and over again."

She met her four-month-old grandson for the first time last week.

"He recognized me through my voice," said Wallace, a life-long reader whose proudest literary accomplishment was finishing *Crime and Punishment*.

The Storybook Program is available to inmates in six B.C. institutions: Alouette, the Surrey Pretrial Services Centre, the Fraser Valley Institution for Women, and Ferndale Institution, a minimum security centre for men, as well as the Prince George and Nanaimo Correctional Centres.

It's part of JustKids, a pro-gram launched nationally this month by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, a non-profit organization that advocates for women and children in the justice system. The goal of JustKids is to connect the children of prisoners and ease the stigma of having a mom or dad in jail. It involves summer day camps and the Saturday Club, with day trips to places like Science World, rock-climbing gyms and the zoo.

The society estimates 2,100 children in the Lower Mainland and 250,000 children across Canada have a parent behind bars - and 60 per cent of those will end up in jail themselves if they don't receive support.

Executive director Shawn Bayes wants the federal and provincial governments to recognize children of inmates require special consideration from both child welfare services and the corrections system.

"We want our kids to be fear-less, to have leadership," she said. "They have an opportunity to do things they never would otherwise."

It's also about understanding, said Debbie, who asked her last name not be used to protect her 10-year-old nephew, whose birth mother was incarcerated before dying of a drug over-dose and whose birth father has been in and out of jail most of his son's life.

Debbie said her now-adopted son, diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, has thrived in the summer camp and the Saturday Club.

"They know each child's problems or difficulties or back-ground. It's not something you would divulge in a normal camp," where kids fear judgment, she said.

The free programs also give guardians a reprieve and lessen the financial pressure of taking on a foster child.

zmcknight@vancouversun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun