

Project Storybook helps imprisoned mothers stay close to their kids

CLINTON, N.J. – Once a month, Pat Brisson enters the gates of the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Clinton to spend an evening with as many as 60 inmates. To Brisson, however, they are not just convicted criminals; they are also loving mothers.

Brisson, who has been writing children's books for more than 20 years, volunteers at the prison to coordinate Project Storybook, a program that allows women serving their sentences to be recorded reading books to their children, grandchildren or other family members.

Brisson recalled being struck at an early age by the passage in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus says, "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; ... I was in prison, and you came to me."

"I would think, 'Well, I see how we do all those other things, but when does anybody ever go visit anyone in prison?'" said Brisson, a parishioner of St. Philip and St. James Parish in Phillipsburg. "I never heard of any kind of prison ministry in the church. I just thought it was totally ignored."

As an adult, discussions with a friend working as a psychiatrist at a men's prison led her to think even more deeply not only about those in prison but the families they had left behind. These questions inspired her to write the book "Mama Loves Me From Away," about a young girl whose mother is in prison.

"I felt like I was being called to step up and do something," she told The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Metuchen Diocese. "Whatever you think about the women, yes, they've made bad choices and they're in prison for a reason, but their children didn't make any bad choices. The children are missing their mothers through no fault of their own."

In 2003, Brisson began the Project Storybook program, which has since grown to

one of the most successful programs at the facility.

Inmates are able to choose from a variety of donated books for children of all ages and are given 15 to 20 minutes to record their readings. Volunteers assist the women in completing the recordings and then package the tapes along with letters from the inmates to the children.

Heather Lindorff said the program has helped her to maintain a relationship with her two sons, whom she has not seen in 11 months. She added that after she suffered a stroke the tapes have allowed her children, ages 11 and 13, to hear her speech improve over the year that she has been sending them tapes.

"My boys absolutely love it," Lindorff said. "The first tape they got they played over and over again. My son said that when he feels like he wants to be close to me, he plays the tape so he can hear my voice."

Milagros Candelaria, a first-time participant in the program, said she hopes Project Storybook will familiarize her 1-year-old son with her voice while she cannot be with him.

"When I first got locked up, he was only six days old. It was heartbreaking," said Candelaria. "He knows my voice, he knows that I am his mother, but I just want to know him a little better."

Brisson said the response of the women participating in the program is often emotional. "We see these women at their most vulnerable," she said. "They are in a very tender moment in their lives. We see them in tears. We see them get choked up doing these recordings."

Although Brisson and her volunteers, who come from a variety of different religious backgrounds, do not discuss their faith with the prisoners, she feels their actions will do more to teach the inmates about the meaning of the Gospel than preaching.

"I feel that they will know we are Christians by our love, whether we mention Jesus to them or not," she said. "I hope that when they see us there, they see God present in us, because I know we see God present in them."

Financial contributions to Project Storybook may be sent to: Pat Brisson, 94 Bullman St., Phillipsburg, NJ 08865, or to: New Jersey Connection c/o Pat Morris, 10 Master St., Franklin, NJ 07416. Checks should be made payable to the New Jersey Connection/Project Storybook.