

Inspired by King's Letters from Jail

Books to Prisoners promotes literacy

BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A converted garage off a northeast Portland side street makes for an unsuspecting clearinghouse to send imprisoned people nationwide thousands of books each year.

The words of Martin Luther King Jr. from a jail cell in Birmingham reflect some of the motivation behind the dozens of hours each week that volunteers log in an effort to promote literacy among the country's most disadvantaged populations.

"The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust," King wrote in response to fellow clergymen who questioned the radicalism of his civil-rights actions that landed him in prison.

Book-sending volunteers can cite reams of data to show that the criminal-justice system remains unequal.

Even though violent crime and property crime have been declining since the 1990s, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the U.S. has the world's largest inmate population at 2.5 million. With less than 5 percent of the world's popula-

tion, America houses over 25 percent of the people incarcerated around the world.

Civil-rights groups have rallied against resurfacing disparities, seeing that about 10.4 percent of all U.S. black males between the ages of 25 and 29 are sentenced and in prison, compared to 2.4 percent of Hispanic males and 1.2 percent of white males.

answer ever-larger boxes of handwritten requests from prisoners for books.

After moving several times in the last few years, the organization's new location at Northeast Morton Street is less than a month away from reaching its first anniversary. The cramped garage houses two desks, thousands of books and often more than a half dozen

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

— Martin Luther King Jr.
"Letter from Birmingham Jail" April, 1963

"Minorities are disproportionately arrested...., disproportionately charged in federal court and then sentenced under especially harsh statutes and guidelines," according to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights report titled Bush Administration Takes Aim.

For Portland's Books to Prisoners program, it hasn't gotten any easier over the years to


volunteers in a space of no more than 300 square feet.

"It's not huge, but it gets the job done," says Kim Garrison, who donates her time out of social-justice values and a "love for books." "I wish we were obsolete and that everyone had access to a complete library." At most prisons, pulp fiction like

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PHOTO BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Jamie Bolwyn finds literature requests sent through Portland Books to Prisoners, an organization that strives to increase literacy among incarcerated populations and raise awareness about criminal-justice disparities.



Martin Luther King, Jr.

Annual City-Wide Worship Service



Theme:

Where Do We Go From Here:
"Chaos or Community?"

Keynote Speaker: Bishop A.A. Wells


When: Sunday, January 13, 2008—6:00pm

Where: Bethel AME Church
5828 NE 8th Avenue (8th and Jarrett)

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