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**KAUAI NEWS**

**Island rallies to help inmates read**

*by Jon Letman - special to the garden island*

Motivated by a desire to help inmates serving time at the Kaua'i Community Correctional Center, Magenta Billett started and completed a successful book drive for inmates at the state-run facility in Wailua.

After receiving a letter from a friend who was incarcerated at KCCC, Billett, who is a clothing designer in Kapa'a, posted a request for used books on the Kaua'i MuseLetter, a community newsletter circulated by e-mail.

In the letter, Billett's friend lamented that KCCC offered nothing to read but a few shelves of "dog-eared paperbacks."

Knowing her friend was an avid reader, Billett asked herself how she could help. She decided to suggest her friends donate old or unwanted books and, realizing that her friend Lani Kawahara was branch manager at the Kapa'a Public Library, asked if she was willing to assist as a drop-off point for donated books.

With Kawahara's support, Billett put the word out to the community suggesting people clear out their shelves and give their old books to a good cause.

"I had no idea what was going to happen," Billett said. "I thought if a few people brought in some books, I would be happy."

The response was, quite literally, overwhelming.



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Two days after the call for books was sounded, Billett received a call from Kawahara saying she'd received enough books to entirely fill her car, and then some.

In three weeks, Kapa'a Public Library's staff accepted and helped carry and store more than 3,000 books and magazines.

Now, where to put them?

Kawahara said Kapa'a Public Library generally accepts donations throughout the year, but this was on a scale not seen before.

"Our staff was happy to collect and keep boxes of books until Magenta could pick them up," Kawahara said, adding the library also collects donated books for Kaua'i Community College's annual book sale as well as the library's own book sale (coming up in late February).

Billett had assumed the jail had an internal library that she would be contributing to but, as KCCC Corrections Education Specialist Jean-Marie McEntee said, "We have just a small office for education and nowhere to keep so many books."

Over the next three months, from late August until November, Billett's home garage was transformed into an impromptu book repository as she shuffled boxes from the library to the jail.

"We couldn't park in our garage for a few months," Billett recalled.

Not only did Kaua'i residents respond with volume, but also with quality reading material. Billett said donated books represented a wide range of topics from fiction and self-help to biographies, action, sci-fi, history and religion.

McEntee called the collection "an extraordinary gamut of really quality material," adding, "It was as if someone gave me \$10,000 and said, 'Go to Borders.'"

Billett, who accepted only books in good to excellent condition, personally wiped down and cleaned all 3,000-plus donations. She then carried a seemingly endless collection of boxes to KCCC where McEntee agreed to store them in her 20-foot by 20-foot office until space could be found in four inmate housing units.

McEntee was able to obtain a large donated bookcase and, with help from the inmates, books were sorted and stored where they can now be checked out by the approximately 140 people incarcerated at any given time.

Response to the donated book program has been very favorable, said McEntee.

"There has been tremendous interest in new reading material. Inmates have been excited, relieved and very willing to help organize the books."

McEntee and Billett expressed their thanks to not only the community for donating such a large number of high-quality books, but to the many people who donated their time and energy to benefit a segment of the population that is largely overlooked.

Both McEntee and Billett were also quick to add that without the support and permission from KCCC warden Neal Wagatsuma, none of this would have been possible.

Perhaps the most heartfelt thanks comes from KCCC inmates themselves. One wrote, "Thank you Kaua'i for your generosity and genuine compassion ... it provides and promotes a sense of humanity for each individual going through a process within this environment we are currently a part of."

Billett added thanks to Kaua'i's online and publishing community for taking notice of what was, for her, simply a desire to help people during a difficult time in their lives. "I saw this as an opportunity to malama these people."

"Prisons should be a place of rehabilitation," Billett said. "I believe the time should



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be used constructively and reading is a good start.”

• Jon Letman is a freelance writer and photographer based in Lihu'e. He is also an interpretive guide at the National Tropical Botanical Garden.

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