

## **Heart of a Tiger: Promises kept and lives touched: local educators ignite hope through learning and literacy**

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - A subtle transformation is taking place in the halls of the Topeka Correctional Facility. A beacon of light is emerging from the dedication of a group committed to literacy and emotional support for incarcerated women and their children. What began as a shared concern over the school-to-prison pipeline has matured into a project that intersects correctional education and compassionate design, providing a ray of light for incarcerated mothers and their children.

April Terry, associate professor of criminal justice, recalls how a simple pinky promise with Sarah Broman Miller, associate professor of teacher education, formed a pact that would change lives. Their shared vision came to fruition when students from a criminal justice course, Women and Crime, and a teacher education course, Literacy Assessment and Interventions, joined to make the promise a reality.

The initiative involved guiding incarcerated mothers and grandmothers at the Topeka Correctional Facility in the art of reading to their kids, transforming a sterile visitation process into a moment of bonding. But the project's scope soon grew beyond books. Recognizing the need for a tool that could alleviate the visiting children's anxieties, April reached out to Karrie Simpson Voth, program chair of art and design, who, along with her graduate student at the time, Thomas Giebler, conceived the cornerstones of comfort and familiarity in a coloring/activity book.

The pandemic introduced challenges, such as curtailing physical visits to the Topeka Correctional Facility. Yet, adaptation unfolded, and a virtual tour paved the way for Karrie and Thomas to thoughtfully create an illustrative echo of what children experience during visits. The embodiment of this experience came through ACE, a character designed to resonate with the "adverse childhood experiences" encountered by many of these kids. ACE, depicted as a comforting cloud, threads a journey of resilience throughout the pages of the activity book.

This project has many meanings for April. "Professionally, I know most incarcerated mothers and grandmothers are locked up due to non-violent offenses. Many times, they are in for drug-related charges as they used to deal with their traumatic pasts. Most are single mothers of multiple children, and their incarceration creates additional trauma to their (grand)children. I've been in that facility many times and have seen where these children visit their mothers. This process can be scary and traumatic."

"While I can't change our laws that allow these mothers to receive long sentences for non-violent offenses, and I can't change many aspects of their incarceration, this project does help better prepare these kids to see their mother in a cold and sterile environment. The coloring/activity book gives them something to work on together and a means for bonding. I often think about how "easy" it is for someone to end up incarcerated in the U.S. I then imagine what it would be like for my four little kids to travel for a six-hour round trip to visit me for a few hours on the weekend, and only if/when someone would bring them," April shared.

Karrie's dedication to socially responsible design harmonized with her mission to support children and embrace empathy. It mirrored the objective shared by April, Thomas, and Sarah: to mitigate the trauma created by maternal separation and the cold backdrop of incarceration.

“I'm passionate about socially responsible design,” Karrie shared. “This project provided an ideal chance to leverage my influence as a designer for positive and meaningful impact. I was also drawn to this project by my deep compassion for children and empathy for mothers, particularly those, as April noted, who are predominantly single mothers incarcerated for non-violent offenses.”

Karrie's dad is a retired educator and administrator who taught horticulture classes to adult men at Norton Correctional Facility. He later became the principal at the Larned Juvenile Correction School District in Larned, KS, where he worked with incarcerated adolescents and teens. Karrie gained valuable insights from his experiences. Witnessing his challenges, especially the emotional toll of working with children, further fueled her commitment to this cause.

In rendering ACE and the world within the coloring book, Thomas aimed to translate a correctional facility's daunting elements into engaging, child-friendly imagery. He sought to offer kids a supportive, approachable, and stable friend in ACE as they navigate the emotional and physical labyrinth of visiting their mothers or grandmothers behind bars.

“I was thankful to have been included in this project. It brought to my attention an issue that I was unfamiliar with. It deepened my understanding that there is so much opportunity to use art as a means of service to your community. I always strive to use my abilities to bring more goodness into the world, and I am excited to think how this activity book might make a child's experience a little brighter,” Thomas shared.

Sarah has always been deeply troubled by the harrowing levels of illiteracy among incarcerated people and the ripple effects on their children. With 70% of incarcerated individuals struggling below a fourth-grade reading level and a direct link to heightened incarceration rates, Sarah recognized the profound impact that improving literacy could have.

The ACE's Adventure collaboration now stands at the brink of expansion, with aspirations to cater to the unseen needs of children visiting their incarcerated fathers and grandfathers. While ACE charms and comforts, behind it lies a stark reflection of academic neglect—a reflection April, Karrie, Thomas, and Sarah have chosen to confront head-on.

Each semester, the cycle of learning and giving continues. Once a year, the students enrolled in Sarah's literacy assessment course volunteer to record themselves reading a children's book aloud. “They send the recordings to our point of contact so she can arrange a time for the women to watch the video recordings in a group,” Sarah said. “Most of the incarcerated women who participate in our research do not know how to read with inflection and change their voices. Viewing the recordings gives them the confidence to read aloud to their children.”

Sarah's students also offer free online tutoring for women at the Topeka Correctional Facility. The target population is women who read at a fourth-grade level and below. Other programs help women earn their GED, but nothing currently exists for women who are struggling readers.

Additionally, Sarah and her students offer free online reading tutoring for children ages three years and up. Their target population is (grand)children of incarcerated women. "We believe it is important to educate both the (grand)mothers and their children to improve their quality of life and open the doors to better opportunities," Sarah said. If you want to volunteer to tutor women or deliver books, please contact Dr. Sarah Broman Miller at [sebmiller@fhsu.edu](mailto:sebmiller@fhsu.edu).

Sarah and her students collect gently used and new stuffed animals and children's books for donation to the family room. When children visit their (grand)mothers, they can choose a stuffed animal and book to take home. The books and animals are delivered to the facility every six months or so.

Through this patchwork of impassioned efforts, via a pinky promise, the sometimes-dim corridors of the Topeka Correctional Facility find themselves illuminated by the hopeful colors of ACE's Adventure. And as children clutch their new stuffed animals and books tightly upon leaving, it's not just a stuffed toy they carry or a coloring page they hold—it's a message that they, too, have the heart of a tiger, braving the adventure of life with a newfound guide and companion.