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Acalanes Students Send Books to Prisoners

By Jean Follmer



Acalanes Junior Rachel Whittom stops to read a letter from a prisoner who requested a book from the Prisoner Literature Project in Berkeley Photo provided

A number of Acalanes juniors recently filled some of their required community service hours reading letters from and sending books to prisoners incarcerated throughout the United States. The students engaged in the volunteer activity at the Prisoners Literature Project (PLP) in Berkeley, which began as a grassroots organization in Bound Together Books on Haight Street in San Francisco in the early 1980s. It still operates entirely as a volunteer organization.

Many prisoners throughout the United States do not have access to books beyond those that are available in the prison libraries. They are only able to receive books from pre-approved sources. PLP is one of them.

Gina Shepard of PLP said, "Some prisons don't allow books at all." She indicated that getting books often involves a power struggle with the prison guards.

Acalanes Junior Class Secretary Rachel Whittom learned about PLP and got in touch with Shepard. Junior Lindsay Cope said, "We wanted to find an organization that would provide a unique opportunity for community service."

Whittom said the experience was very rewarding for the students. "I really enjoyed this program. I thought it was really beneficial because the prisoners are trying to get better and improve their life when they get out of prison," she said. "I thought about it after we were done and I really think we did something that made a difference."

Cope agreed with Whittom. "I think, overall, it was really eye-opening to read such personal accounts from the letters, and by sending books to each recipient we actually made a huge difference," she said. "It's amazing to know that the books and letters you send will bring hope to people who need it the most."

Shepard said the prisoners generally learn about PLP through advertisements in prison publications and flyers. The prisoners send letters to PLP requesting books that are not available at their detention facility. Some request specific books and others request books on a specific topic. PLP has recently become a popular community service venue for high school students. "Lately we've mostly been having student volunteers," said Shepard.

For more information, visit <http://www.prisonersliteratureproject.com/>.

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