



The POWER of Storytelling

An innovative organization in Texas connects female inmates with their children, one book at a time.

BY ERIN QUINN-KONG

“I LOVE OUR TIME TOGETHER AS we start each happy day,” reads Morgan, 21, from the children’s book *I Love You to the Moon and Back*. “I love our bathtime silliness—the way we splash and play.” She pauses. “Do you splash in the bathtub?”

The question is directed to her 20-month-old son, Maddox, but Morgan isn’t snuggled up beside her little boy. Instead, she’s sitting in a near-empty classroom, reading into a recording device held by Gail Massad, 72, a volunteer for the Women’s Storybook Project of Texas. Another volunteer will transfer the recording onto a CD that, along with the book, will be mailed to Maddox so that he can listen to his mother’s voice.

Morgan sees Maddox only every six months or so because she’s in prison at the Hilltop Unit in Gatesville, TX, about 100 miles north of Austin. Two years into an eight-year sentence, Morgan hopes that reading from afar to her son, who was taken in by his uncle through an open adoption, will help her stay connected to him.

It seems to be working. The last time Maddox came to visit, he remembered her. “When I held him, he looked at me like he knew my voice, and he was calm,” she says. “Usually he’s a wiggle worm.”

Back in the classroom, part of the educational system at Hilltop, Morgan’s



Morgan with the nonprofit’s signature book.

voice wavers as she reads the last line of the book: “I love you to the moon and stars, my precious little one.” She wipes away a tear.

“That was so good,” says Gail. “He’s going to love it.”

STARTING SMALL

Founded in 2003 by Austin resident Judith Dullnig, the Women’s Storybook Project of Texas is a nonprofit organization that connects children to their incarcerated mothers through books.

Hilltop, which houses about 500 women, many of whom have children, is where Judith first launched the organization. Back then, she had just 25 books she’d purchased from T.J. Maxx and the help of five volunteers. Today the Hilltop inmates get to choose from about 600 books, ranging from early readers to the *Harry Potter* series.

In April, Lucy, left, made a recording of the book *Love*, by Helen O’Dare and Nicola O’Byrne, for her son, Izaiah.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BUFF STRICKLAND.

The books are bought with private donations and grants, and the program has 200 volunteers working with about 2,500 offenders across Texas.

Offenders must have good behavior for 90 days to qualify for the four-month program and avoid any “cases,” or citations, against them in order to participate in each monthly reading session.

An unassuming yet assertive brunette, Judith understands the challenges of a tumultuous childhood. Her father was killed in World War II before she was born, and her mother died of polio when Judith was only 8. “She read to us, as did my grandparents,” says Judith. “I’ll always remember that.”

Judith was visiting a friend in Kentucky when she first heard about a similar reading program for incarcerated women. She was immediately intrigued. “I know how important it is for a child to hear her mother’s voice,” she says.

A former educational consultant with a master’s degree in educational psychology, Judith designed a program for 12 offenders with the help of a social worker. “The feedback was amazing,” she says. “They said, ‘My child carried the tape wherever he went.’ I could tell this was a neglected population.”



“It’s a simple idea with big impact,” says Judith, who founded the Storybook Project.



These women are just like you and me. They miss their children. More important, their children miss them.”



A VITAL CONNECTION

Each Storybook Project session begins with Opening Circle. The volunteer leader lays out the schedule for the day and reads the organization’s signature book, *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst, which describes the ties that bind people even when they’re separated. Then the inmates and volunteers introduce themselves and talk about why they want to participate in the program. The meetings end with each woman sharing a fun fact about her child, like a favorite food or activity, with the group.

On this day, Judith walks to the middle of the circle, where 23 women, all dressed in white scrubs, wait patiently to record

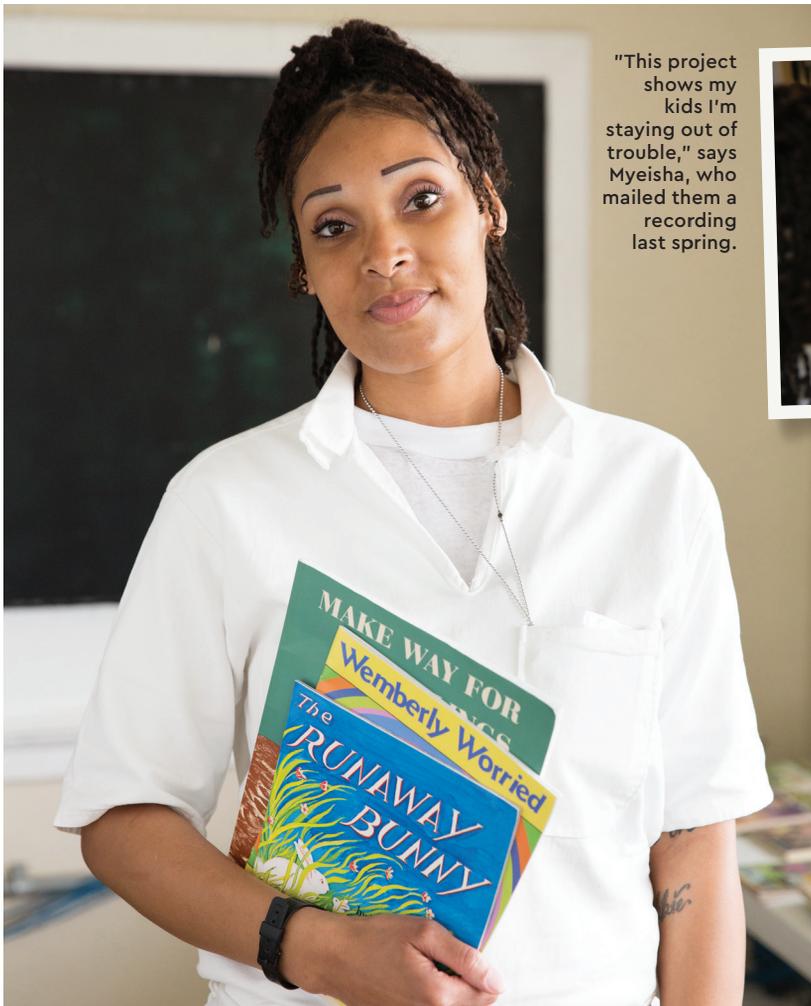
for their children—a combined 52 kids. When she says she is the founder of the Storybook Project, several of the offenders gasp, while others clap. “We’re here so your children can hear you say ‘I love you,’” says Judith, adding, “It’s going to be emotional. It’s OK to cry.”

There are plenty of tears as each inmate shares her story—including Lucy, 24, who hadn’t communicated with her 6-year-old son, Izaiah, for two years before sending him a book and a CD of her reading it to him through the Storybook Project. After Izaiah received the package, Lucy’s nieces, who live with Izaiah, wrote her a letter for the very first time. Lucy decides to read *Love* by Helen O’Dare and Nicola O’Byrne, which illustrates the unconditional bond between a parent and a child. “I’m sure Izaiah will love it because of my voice,” she says.

Myeisha, 26, sees her two daughters, 8-year-old Danaka and 9-year-old Yesena, every month or so, but she does the readings to prove to her kids that she’s committed to staying on the straight and narrow. Today she has chosen *Little Miss Somersault*



Inmates have their choice of hundreds of books.



"This project shows my kids I'm staying out of trouble," says Myeisha, who mailed them a recording last spring.



GUARDING THE FUTURE

Fifteen years after starting the Storybook Project, Judith continues to expand its reach and is incorporating new technology. Over the next few years, she'd like to introduce the program at other women's prisons in Texas. She recently launched a Storybook Project app created by Google for the organization to use as CDs become obsolete. Through the app, volunteers will upload recordings that inmates' loved ones can access digitally.

The app's pilot program kicked off at the Mountain View Unit, also located in Gatesville, in April, and Judith plans to roll it out gradually to the other women's prisons that participate in the Storybook Project.

In the end, it all comes back to the children. That Judith's beloved program works is evident through Lucy's son, Izaiah, who is again connected with his mother after two years of silence. Roxanne, Izaiah's caregiver, says, "When we received the first book and CD, several family members got really emotional. They said it had been so long since they'd heard Lucy's voice. And now her son has a constant reminder that his mother is thinking of him."

❖ For more information about the Women's Storybook Project of Texas, go to storybookproject.org.

by Roger Hargreaves for Danaka, who "does cartwheels all the time," she says. For Yesena, she picks *From Far Away* by Robert Munsch, the true story of a little girl who was a refugee from war-ravaged Lebanon. "She's my thinker," Myeisha says.

VOLUNTEERS' VIEWS

One of Judith's biggest advocates from the start was Nancy Botkin, who spent 24 years working in Texas prisons and was the warden at Hilltop for eight years before retiring in 2004. (She's on the Storybook Project board.) "Most women in prison are going home eventually, so we need programs like this one to keep communication with kids alive

until their mothers get back," says Nancy.

Pat Roberts, 67, the volunteer team leader at Hilltop, says the children are the reason she's been volunteering with the Storybook Project for 14 years. "These women are just like you and me," she says. "They miss their children. More important, their children miss them."

For Gail, a retired teacher who has been a volunteer with the Storybook Project for eight years, it's also about helping the offenders. "I think of them as mothers and as women who made a mistake," she says.

Gail's sister, Sandy Carey, 74, and daughter, Katie Massad McDanald, 43, volunteer as well. Sandy says, "For a few hours, they aren't prisoners—they're moms."