

Johnson County Library Wins National 2008 Cavendish Award

by Marsha Bennett, Johnson County Library

The Johnson County Library (KS) has been named the 2008 winner of the American Library Association's (ALA) Marshall Cavendish Excellence in Library Programming Award for its Literature in the Justice System program.

In its announcement, the Marshall Cavendish Excellence in Library Programming Award Committee said, "*The Johnson County Library is to be commended as one of the first in the nation in identifying and addressing a need in our communities and a critical societal issue of teens and women in the justice system.*"



The three outreach activities included in the library's Literature in the Justice System program are: *Read to Succeed*, a literature program for teens incarcerated at the Juvenile Detention Center; *Changing Lives Through Literature*, an alternative sentencing program for teens and adults; and *Stories about Women*, an adaptation of *Read to Succeed* for women in the Johnson County Corrections Adult Residential Center.

The library collaborates with the Johnson County Juvenile Detention Center, Johnson County Corrections, and Johnson County Courts in these programs. The impetus began in 1997 with a community task force from which two library programs emerged: *Read to Succeed* and *Changing Lives Through Literature*, an alternative sentencing program based on a Massachusetts model.

System-wide Services Manager Tricia Suellentrop and Youth Outreach Librarian Kathy McLellan developed the two teen programs, which began in 1998. Johnson County Library believes it was the first public library to implement this type of interactive literature discussion programming with teens in the justice system, partnering with Johnson County Corrections and District Courts.

Stories about Women, begun in 2005, is an adaptation of *Read to Succeed* for women in the Johnson County Corrections Adult Residential Center and Therapeutic Community, co-developed and co-facilitated by Outreach Services Coordinator C.J. Sullivan and Carole Thrasher, Volunteer/Recreation Coordinator for the Center.

Using stories and discussion as tools, these three programs forge self-reflection in probationers and inmates. And as the participants become engaged with the stories – narratives of characters very like

themselves – they recognize themselves and the ideas of choice and consequences and the complexity of life.

Program facilitators have indicated that these literature discussions – where there are no right or wrong answers – allow the participants to have a voice, which is key to rebuilding their confidence, their self-identity, and their view of society.

The *Changing Lives Through Literature* program, which is also offered to adult offenders, has a long track record of lower recidivism rates than Johnson County Corrections as a whole. While the other two programs cannot track outcomes as easily due to fluid residencies, officials have observed very positive effects from the programs, and the *Stories about Women* program is being expanded.

At the very least, participants frequently become readers where they were not before and learn to enjoy reading as a leisure activity and as a resource.

These programs are part of service delivery from the library's Outreach Department, whose mission it is to serve those who cannot come to the library.

The Cavendish Award will be presented on Tuesday, July 1, 2008, at the ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, CA.

The Johnson County Library serves a population area of 405,200 and received the 2005 National Award for Museum and Library Service. This is the nation's highest honor for extraordinary public service provided by a library or museum.