

Inmates Surpass Million-word Challenge

By Katie Tower, Staff Reporter, Sackville Tribune-Post

Photo: Katie Tower



Scholastic Book representative, Karen Forsyth, reads the book *How Much Is A Million?* at a reception at Westmorland Institution to celebrate the achievements of the inmates.

Two hundred and eighty-five books and 14 million words later, inmates at Westmorland Institution were praised last week during a special reception for their outstanding achievement.

When Rosemary Pineau, a teacher at Westmorland Institution, issued a “million-word” challenge to the inmates last month, she knew they would probably reach the target she had set for them. But she admits she is a little taken aback that the inmates surpassed the goal by leaps and bounds.

“I didn’t have any idea it would take off as well as it did,” said Pineau, prior to the reception.

About 50 inmates participated in Pineau’s challenge. The teacher said the inmates were given a month leading up to International Literacy Day (September 8) to read one million words.

“I asked for only a million words because I thought it would be three or four guys,” she said. She was surprised when more and more inmates kept signing up to participate. “I issued this challenge and the guys just sort of went with it.”

Since International Literacy Day comes every year, Pineau said the teachers at the institution try to continually come up with new ideas that will motivate the inmates.

“We’re always trying to come up with something different.”

The inmates hit 14 million words the morning of the reception, which pleased Westmorland Institution’s Warden Mike Corbett.

“You should all feel good about this achievement today,” he told the inmates prior to handing out awards for their efforts. Corbett noted that there’s no greater gift than the gift of literacy. He related a story about an inmate that was on temporary leave about two years ago and returned to the institution excited because, for the first time, he was able to read a bedtime story to his little girl.

“What a wonderful thing to happen in a place where we need nice things to happen,” he said.

Literacy has always been an important part of the rehabilitation process at Westmorland, and has become even more prominent in the last five years since the Turning A New Page program was instituted. Turning A New Page, a partnership between Correctional Services Canada, Scholastic Books and School District 2, allows inmates at the minimum-security institution to improve their reading skills, thus facilitating their participation in correctional programming and, ultimately, assisting them to become law-abiding citizens.

Once they’ve mastered reading a book, inmates record the story on audio tape. Cassettes, along with copies of the book, are then distributed to elementary schools in southeastern New Brunswick where teachers are using both to help children learn how to read.

Corbett praised the initiative, which has enabled hundreds of children who have difficulty reading on their own to enjoy books on audio tape.

“There’s nothing more worthwhile than to contribute to the life of a child,” he said.

Karen Forsyth, a representative from Scholastic Books, and Nina Gamble, a representative from Excalibur Learning Resource Centre, were also on hand for the ceremony last Wednesday.

Gamble presented an award to Pineau for her “exceptional ability to motivate others.” Pineau explained that she was simply trying to get the inmates to do their best.

“I was taught from a very early age that you can do anything that you want to do,” she said. “It just takes effort. So if you read 12 words or you read one million words, I applaud you for taking part in this activity.” ■