

Opportunities for Writers: the Zeb Pike Youth Correctional Facility

By Ronald Cree

The lady in the red hat looked no different than the other spectators enjoying the Manitou Springs Coffin Races last October.

It was an exceptionally nice day, and I was sitting with my friend Robert Spiller outside Black Cat Books, handing out copies of my mystery novel for teens, *Desert Blood 10pm/9c*.

“Does this contain a lot of sex and violence?” the lady asked, taking in the blood splatters on the book’s front cover. I assured her the storyline was a tender one involving a young father and his newly adopted son.

Only slightly convinced, she asked me to sign the copy to “The Boys at Zeb Pike”. She then introduced herself as Cheryl Lassota, the principal of the local Juvenile Detention Center. “I’ll read it first,” she said. “If it’s appropriate, I’ll make sure it finds its way into the Center’s library.”

Two days later, I received a phone call. “I couldn’t put it down!” Cheryl exclaimed. “I stayed on the couch all Sunday, reading your book and thinking how much the boys at the Center would relate to it. It was as if you’d written it for them.”

I soon agreed to an author visit later that week, and a donation of a book to every boy in the place. “They’re going to love this,” Cheryl said. Her voice dropped. “Most of the guys are young sex offenders. They come to us having lost much of their family, friends, and support structure. Many have been in the system a long time.”

I was surprised to learn the Center was adjacent to Bear Creek Park. I’d driven by it numerous times, never pausing to question what the grey brick building was, or to consider the lives of those behind the surrounding fence. But now, I wondered what a teenage sex offender would look like. How would they react to me? What questions would they ask? How could my silly little mystery be anything more than something they’d dismiss with an eyeroll and a derisive laugh?

I showed up on time and went through the process for admission: buzzers to push, intercoms to speak into, visitors sheets to sign. Cheryl led me on a quick tour, pointing out classrooms, bare-bones “pods” where the boys live, recreation areas, and perhaps most surprisingly: a rather full library!

The boys we passed in the hallways were polite and young. Whites, African-Americans, and Hispanics. Each greeted me with a curious stare and a well-mannered “hello.” They were nicely dressed in their school-issued polo shirts and trousers.

“They’ve never met an author before,” Cheryl whispered. “This is a very big deal.”

It was Halloween, and the boys had made and decorated gingerbread haunted houses. I was immediately asked to be a “celebrity judge”. The creative talent in each house was astounding, making the task of selecting the best almost impossible.

“There’s a prize for the winner,” Cheryl informed me, adding to the pressure. “I asked the boys what they’d like to have if they won, and the answer was unanimous: a book or magazine they could own and keep in their room.”

My appearance was divided into two sessions to accommodate the population of the Center—around 30 boys. Working as a team, the kids converted the cafeteria into a comfortable reading venue with several rows of chairs for the audience.

I took my seat at the front of the room and was taken aback by the wide-eyed, eager faces. I introduced myself and announced that I would do a brief reading followed by questions, answers, and a signing. The usual.

I read a part of Chapter 4, hoping it would be exciting enough to hold their attention. It was. I've never had such a spellbound audience. They laughed, squirmed, gasped, and held their breath at all the right places.

When I finished, the questions began immediately. These kids were curious—about the book, about being an author, about what I was going to write next. When Cheryl announced that each of them would be getting a signed copy of their own, the room broke out in enthusiastic cheers.

Reading and signing my novel for the boys at Zeb Pike was one of the most fun, rewarding things I've done. No press, no pictures, no announcement in the newspaper. I sold no books, met no other authors, received no free lunch. I signed 30 books that day. The gratitude on their faces will stay with me forever. I was humbled and touched when the group presented me with a beautiful wooden ink pen engraved with my name—that they'd made in their own workshop!

I've returned to Zeb Pike several times. I've been interviewed for the boys' first newsletter. I've shared more of my writing and helped them with writing of their own. Their enthusiasm for stories, poetry, and publishing is limitless. To that end, I've invited other Colorado authors to get involved. In March, Julie Anne Peters drove down from Denver and spoke about her books involving gay/lesbian/transgender issues. She wrote of the experience on her Facebook page: "I had a tough day booktalking Luna with incarcerated young sex offenders. It's going to be hard to sleep tonight." Still, she expressed to me that it was one of the most rewarding visits of her career.

In April, Robert Spiller stopped by and engaged the kids with his trademark humor, sharing lots of jokes, funny stories, and laughter. He gave away copies of his wonderful Bonnie Pinkwater series and promised to return.

With each visit, I feel more like I'm among friends. The boys treat me like a rock star, eager to hear about my writing and excited to tell me about the books they've been reading. Seeing the much-read, cherished copies of *Desert Blood 10pm/9c* in their hands is the best feeling in the world.

I'd encourage any writer (published or unpublished) who wishes to get involved to contact me and set up a visit of your own.

You'll be glad you did.

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