

Prison Librarian ◀

BRIEFLY: Librarian Nancy's patrons are prisoners. They come into the library because they have few other forms of entertainment. And her employees are usually short term, working only until they are released. But she teaches them library skills to make them employable outside the walls and says, "They inspire and amaze me!"

Nancy Opens Minds Behind Locked Doors

"We Need to Support These Women"

"Working here isn't much different from working anywhere else," Nancy says. "If you love what you are doing, the rest falls into place."

Nancy is teacher/librarian at Grand Valley Prison, a federal prison for women in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Although the inmates have been convicted of serious crimes, they live not in cells but in cottages. Each day they go either to jobs or school on the grounds. Nancy teaches the women here how to search for books and research information for school projects. She also trains some of them to do the tasks required to keep the library up-to-date. These women develop skills they can transfer to jobs once they are released from prison.

She doesn't think of her employees as inmates. "To me, they are just women, employees and clients who deserve my respect and attention like any other human being. I am positive and respectful to them and expect everyone who comes in my library to have this attitude, too."

Naturally curious as a teen-ager, Nancy threw herself into situations that were both active and demanded concentration. She taught swimming at a YMCA camp, worked as an itinerant teacher for the Red Cross, and made candy floss on a public beach. "That was probably my favorite job," she says. "I loved meeting people from near and far away, and, when we got too hot or sticky, we would dash off for a swim in the lake. Is there a better job?"

Her home life, however, was not as carefree. Her father suffered from a bipolar disorder that wasn't diagnosed until he was much older. His family had to put up with his violent mood swings. "I admire my mother more than anyone else in this world!" Nancy exclaims. "She started her life over after my father ruined her financially. While her friends were thinking of retiring in Florida, she was looking for a job, an apartment, and a way to build her credit rating. She is now in her 80s, and she still swims laps with me every week. She wears me out!"



► Nancy (right) shows a new employee how to shelve books.

After earning a degree in English and psychology, Nancy became a physical education teacher and eventually department head. She married another teacher, who became his school's principal.

"We had two children in two years, and Cord always joked that one was like none and two were like 10," she recalls. "But he encouraged

FOR THE RECORD



Nancy
Correctional Educator/Librarian
Correctional Services Canada
Grand Valley Prison for Women
Ontario, Canada

EDUCATION

- ▶ Vincent Massey Collegiate, Welland, Ontario. Favorite subjects—English and literature. Favorite activities—swimming and figure skating. *“I read everything I could get my hands on. I did every athletic thing that was possible.”*
- ▶ University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario. Bachelor’s degree in English and psychology. Completed special education training.

WORK HISTORY

- ▶ Physical education teacher, then department head, Waterloo School Board, Ontario.
- ▶ Part-time substitute teacher and homemaker.
- ▶ Educational assistant, Waterloo, one year.

JOB BENEFITS

- ▶ None. *“I am in a contract position at the prison, so I’m not eligible for benefits. My contract is renewed each year.”*

CLOSE-UP

- ▶ *“A lot of terrible things that we have no control over happen in our lives. But I’ve always believed we choose whether to let bad things ruin our lives or make us better people.”*
- ▶ *“There is a rift between security staff and programs staff. Security staff’s goal is to keep things running quietly and smoothly. Programs staff’s goal is to develop prisoners’ skills and knowledge. So, if we try to run a program during count or at an off time, it can wreak havoc with security staff’s routine. We’ve had classes canceled because security guards received mixed messages about when and where the women were to be.”*
- ▶ *“I enjoy interacting with the women I work with. Each one is different and brings something new and exciting to the library. I love seeing their self-esteem and self-confidence grow. Their laughter, friendship, and trust in me as they relax and learn in the library are very rewarding.”*

me to upgrade my education, volunteer, and substitute teach. He never wanted me to sacrifice my career or my dreams for our family.” The children were just 9 and 7 when Cord died from a massive heart attack while walking home from school. Fortunately, Nancy was already teaching part time. “And that job kept our life on track after his death,” she says.

Shortly after the federal government built a prison in her city, a friend showed Nancy its ad for a teacher/librarian. She mailed her resumé. “I received a nice rejection notice because the position was filled. But a week later, a man called to ask if I was still interested. Apparently, the fellow they had hired was not happy.”

Nancy went through a rigorous interview process and security clearance. Her fingerprints were submitted to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) for national and international investigation. Her bank accounts, loans and mortgages, and next of kin were also examined to ensure that she would not be susceptible to bribes.

“When I went for my first visit, I stood outside the metal gate without a tremor of nervousness,” she recalls. “I knew that, if I didn’t like the job, I would know right away, so I wasn’t worried.”

Finds Common Ground

The principal greeted her, introduced her to a few teachers, and gave her a Personal Protection Appliance (PPA), demonstrating how to press it to summon security in an emergency. Then he took her to the library and disappeared. A few women had entered with Nancy. “I chatted with them, and we quickly found common things to talk about. I had no idea what I was doing, so I asked their help signing out books and putting things away. Because I met the women on my own,” she contends, “I saw for myself if this was something I wanted to do.”

She liked it and today depends on her “clients” to run an efficient library. She teaches the women to process labels for magazines and new books and to inventory materials. “We constantly get donations, but some books are too old or worn to use or just won’t interest anyone here,” she explains. “Our space is limited, too, so we’re always going through inventory to see what books are being used and what books are sitting. We do keep some unused books, though, be-



► Nancy (left) asks employees to learn how to do everything in the library so they have employable skills when they leave prison.

cause of the constant change of women. Someone down the road might be interested in them.”

The women also learn to repair books, reshelve them, and process requests for materials from both the prison library and the community library. “Once a week a driver drops off 10 to 15 huge plastic tubs filled with books,” Nancy says. “I set all the books on tables in a classroom, and, after lunch, the women can pick out new reading material.”

Papers and books pile up until someone comes to work. “I could do all the library work myself, but that wouldn’t teach the women anything. Staff and inmates are constantly changing, so it’s hard to achieve any consistency.”

Nancy tries to uncover the individuality of each employee and each woman who uses the library. “Some women are very needy while others want to be left alone,” she observes. “I try not to intrude or ask too many questions. I wait for them to come to me, and then I offer help.

“It doesn’t always work, though. Recently, a newcomer to the prison came into the library every day for a week. I tried to let her know she could come here whenever she wanted. Then one night she tried to kill herself, and I wondered if I should have been more vocal. The balance between intrusion and friendship is hard to maintain in a place like this,” she points out.

Yesterday, on her way to work, Nancy picked up the *Montreal Gazette* for one woman who speaks English but can only read French. She also stopped at a department store for fliers. “The women are allowed outside shopping, but they rarely get to see a flier,” she notes. “So I grabbed a bunch to keep in the library for them.”

At the prison, she signed in, got her keys, and picked up the local newspaper from the front desk. A guard searched her bag and directed her through a metal detector. Gifts of any kind are considered contraband and are grounds for arrest. By 9:30, she had opened the library, attached her PPA, and called security to say she had arrived at her destination and was wearing the PPA.

Her employees Sara and Margie, who had been waiting for her, got right to work on inventory. They knew exactly what they were supposed to do.

Mutual Admiration Society

Two other women had also been waiting for the library to open so they could look for something to read. “And,” Nancy says, “one young girl wanted to search for information on her mother’s medical condition. We spent well over an hour searching various library systems within the region and placing numerous books on hold. Another young lady needed someone to facilitate a call to her lawyer. That took more time. My two assistants also needed help to repair a few books that had been returned the night before.”

The library began to empty by 11:30 because the women must be in their cottages by 11:45 for the official noon count. During count, Nancy teaches journal-writing class. She picked up lunch from the staff room; then met her team teacher and eight women in the designated classroom.

“After about two months now we have a mutual admiration society going on. They know about my life, and I learn more from them in every class. They inspire and amaze me. They teach me empathy for people who have made wrong choices. Society has no clue what goes on inside a prison,” she says. “We really need to support these women rather than punish them.”

After lunch, she returned to the library. “Women working toward their high school diploma need help finding the right materials for

Prison Librarian

classes. Others are just looking for a good book to read and need help with interlibrary loan requests.”

One employee had decided to tackle the label-printing program. “The printer won’t center the information on the label,” Nancy explains. “I’m so tired of struggling with each magazine each month that I’d said I’d do it by hand. But the employee wants to figure it out. And she might.

“I’d like to be more involved in the women’s personal lives when they leave. I’ve been in contact with one released woman through her parole officer. Her lack of support in the community frustrates me. Working for the government is

harder than working with inmates,” she adds. “Everything moves at a snail’s pace, and it’s hard to implement change.”

On weekends, she and her two grown children walk, ski, camp, play tennis, and go on picnics. Nancy also swims, plays racquetball and golf, and reads, especially book reviews and best-sellers. She also browses in bookstores and on the Internet.

“I’m looking forward to retiring and using my time and energy to volunteer,” she says. “I’d love to be here for the women, to be able to give completely without any worries about job security.”

DATA FILE

Prison Librarian

O*NET:25-4022.00 D.O.T.:100.167-022 HC:SEC

WORK DESCRIPTION

Directs prison library—assigns tasks to workers; teaches inmates to check books in and out; shows workers how to reshelve books; assists employees and library patrons with use of computer; helps inmates research for school projects and personal interests; teaches inmates to inventory library materials; orders books and magazines; shows workers how to repair damaged books; teaches classes; sets up individualized programs; submits program proposals for government approval; helps inmates to select reading materials and apply for interlibrary loans.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Indoors in prison library and classrooms. Must adhere to security measures, such as being searched when entering prison and wearing a personal security device. May experience frustration in having to deal with government red tape when implementing programs. Risk of physical injury by inmates.

PLACES OF EMPLOYMENT

Federal or state prisons and reformatories.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Desire to help others; empathy; ability to work with all kinds of people; patience; tact; liking for reading; ability to motivate others; verbal ability; carefulness; ability to inspire trust; sense of humor; pleasantness; discretion; objectivity; enthusiasm; teaching ability; organization; problem-solving ability; responsibility; flexibility.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Bachelor’s degree in English, education, library science, or related field. Computer training recommended.

JOB OUTLOOK

Average growth (5% - 10%).

SALARY RANGE *U.S. median wage*

\$29.24 hourly, \$60,820 a year, depending on hours worked, employer, education, and experience.

RELATED OCCUPATIONS

Homeless Shelter Director
Prison Vocational Training Deputy Director
School Librarian

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The subject of this biography is not available to answer personal inquiries. For more information addresses are current as of publication date.

American Library Association
Web Site: <http://www.ala.org>

Correctional Education Association
Web Site: <http://www.ceanational.org/>

Special Libraries Association
Web Site: <http://www.sla.org/>

American Correctional Association
Web Site: <http://www.aca.org/>

To find information about similar careers, see *Voc-Bio's Pathways* or *Cluster* search, an encyclopedia, or books on careers found in your library, career center, or counseling or placement office. Look up the following words:

Corrections, Educator, Librarian, Prison, Rehabilitation, Teaching, Training, Vocational. Also see the Business and Office, Communications and Media, Fine Arts and Humanities, and Public Service Careers clusters.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

Call a prison or reformatory in your area and ask to visit so you can talk to librarians there and see if you would be comfortable working in such an environment. Volunteer at a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, or crisis hot-line. Tutor younger students. Take courses in computers, composition, English, history, geography, foreign languages, psychology, social studies, and speech.

LIFESTYLE IMPLICATIONS

Prison librarians usually work regular daytime hours, leaving evenings and weekends free for personal and family activities. However, they must be careful not to take work concerns into private life.

Persons are portrayed herein without regard to race, sex, or religious background. Careers discussed are to be considered acceptable for either sex.

Prison Librarian. “Nancy Opens Minds Behind Locked Doors.” *VocBio* - Vocational Biographies. Web.