

Making a positive out of a negative

SIREN - Thursday, Dec. 9, was a great day for Burnett County Jail Captain Terry Nesvold. Another first for the Burnett County Jail was scored that day with the arrival of Nesvold's college buddy from 37 years ago, Paul Gilbertson. Gilbertson, who lives in Madison, brought a new program with him that Nesvold will implement in the jail, making this the first jail in the country to offer R.E.A.C.H. a Child to children visiting the jail's inmates.

The objective of the program is to put smiles on the faces of the silent victims (meaning children) of crisis by offering them books to read and to help those who respond first in crisis situations to engage these children in a positive way.

"Our department responded to a house fire," wrote Sheriff Kim V. Gaffney from Marquette County in a flyer advertising the program. "The home was occupied by a husband, wife and five children ages 3-20 years." Gaffney, his officers and firemen used Gilbertson's program and started to give books away. "One of the girls noticed a 'Charlotte's Web' book and stated she would like to have it, as the one she owned just burned in the fire. The family was very thankful," Gaffney concluded.

Gilbertson turned to writing children's books when the economy hit his career of building condominiums in Madison and the Dane County area. His first book, "Kind-Hearted Pig With Wings and a Halo" was published in 2000. He's now written 20 books.

In May 2007, Gilbertson and his wife were thinking about reviving the children's book business. They went to New York for a national author and publishers convention. While in New York and on a visit to Ground Zero, they were struck by the pictures drawn by children affected by the 9/11 disaster. Gilbertson came up with the idea of giving books to children to shift their thinking to something other than the crisis they were facing. He and Chris went home and, on Aug. 16, 2007,



Burnett County Jail Administrator Captain Terry Nesvold (L) welcomed his college friend, Paul Gilbertson, to the county Thursday, Dec. 9. Gilbertson brought his nonprofit program, R.E.A.C.H. a Child to the county for use in the jail and by law enforcement and emergency providers. The program, which will be offered in the jail, makes available backpacks of books to give to children visiting their parent or another incarcerated person. The goal is to divert the child's attention from a crisis to a positive frame of mind. "There are a lot of ways to take this program if we open our heads and minds to it," Nesvold commented.



Burnett County Deputy Stephanie Wedin was instrumental in preparing for the start of the R.E.A.C.H. a Child program in Burnett County.



Law enforcement and emergency providers throughout the county, including the police chiefs of the county's three villages and the St. Croix Tribal police chief, came to the Burnett County Government Center Thursday, Dec. 9, to meet Paul Gilbertson, to hear about the program he co-founded and to pick up a supply of the book backpacks Gilbertson brought with him from Madison. - Photos by Nancy Jappe

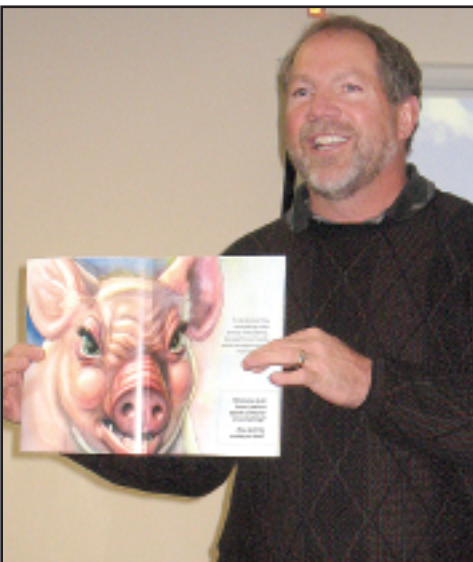
"This is true crime prevention. It really does make a difference in the lives of kids."

- Paul Gilbertson

the nonprofit, "With Wings and a Halo - R.E.A.C.H. a Child!" was born.

The idea behind the nonprofit was presented for the first time Nov. 8, 2007, at a meeting of all the police chiefs in Dane County. Gilbertson talked for about 10 minutes about the benefit of having books to give to children involved in accidents, fires, domestic situations or at any time they are feeling sad or lost. "Paul, this is the best idea I have ever heard," one of the chiefs said at the end of the talk.

Supplying all 350 vehicles in Dane



Co-founder Paul Gilbertson is shown here holding up his first published children's book, "Kind-Hearted Pig with Wings and a Halo." From his own writings Gilbertson went on to co-found a program that distributes books to children in crisis situations and as a positive introduction to law enforcement officers and emergency personnel.

County would require 4,000 books. At this time, Gilbertson had 40 of his own books to contribute and a friend, also a writer, had 400 books. One donation led to another (including the donation of 3,500 books from a man in New York), and by Dec. 13, 350 backpacks with 12 books in each were ready for the Dane County officers. To date, more than 15,000 backpacks have been placed in squad cars all over the United States.

It's not just law enforcement that are using the book backpacks. In Dane County, staff from health and human services and social services carry backpacks with them. Gilbertson's goal is to have this become a national program within five years. (The program is now in its third year.)

Two stories Gilbertson told during his visit to Burnett County demonstrate the



Siren Transportation Officer (and also Siren Fire Chief) Tom Howe took time to look over the books available to children in crisis through the R.E.A.C.H. a Child program. For more information, the program has a Web site at REACHaChild.org.

impact of the book backpack program. He talked about a minor car accident that left two girls crying in the backseat. "I gave them a backpack and, within one minute, they were both laughing," Gilbertson said.

Another story involved a rollover Christmas accident near the Wisconsin Dells where a grandmother was killed outright. A girl in the car, who was in shock, grabbed one of the backpacks. "Do you mind if I take these books with me in the ambulance to the hospital?" she asked. "This is what I wanted to see happen," Gilbertson said.

Books can be given away to any child, not necessarily ones in crisis. The goal in this is to reach the children in a positive manner before they have committed any crime. It's all a matter of establishing a positive relationship at an early age that will carry on as the child ages.

"This is true crime prevention. It really does make a difference in the lives of kids," Gilbertson said.



During the talk by Paul Gilbertson at Burnett County Government Center, a young boy walked over to look at the book display on a nearby table, books that will be available to law enforcement and emergency providers, as well as jail staff, throughout the county.

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