

San Quentin inmates offer literacy help

Tad Whitaker

Olish Tunstall, a convicted murderer at San Quentin State Prison, was watching the Oprah Winfrey Show last year when he got an idea.

With more than a decade of tutoring other inmates behind him, Tunstall, 39, was well aware of the value of books and having access to them. So imagine his surprise when word spread that all three libraries in Salinas, hometown of author John Steinbeck, were closing due to a lack of money.

Like a lot of people, he was outraged. But unlike a lot of people, he did something about it.

Tunstall and a group of others inmates worked extra hard on the prison's food sale this spring and eventually raised \$1,500. Last night, during a special ceremony inside a San Quentin classroom, the prisoners personally handed over \$1,000 to Salinas Mayor Pro Tem Jyl Lutes and another \$500 to Marin Literacy Program Director Barbara Barwood.

"We're going to raise the money from good-hearted people like you," Lutes told the inmates. "By God, we're going to keep those libraries open."

The donation was made possible by inmate tutors and students who are part of Project R.E.A.C.H. - Reach for Education, Achievement and Change with Help - sponsored by the Marin Literacy Program. Many of them attended last night's event to support Lutes and share their feelings with like-minded people worried about the decline of funding for such things as libraries.

"It's offensive," said Abraham Glasper, a 36-year-old inmate and tutor.

The plight of Salinas' libraries began with the economic downturn a few years ago, Lutes said last night. The city's declining revenue suffered even more when the state withheld its vehicle licensing fees.

She said the city had already stopped cleaning public restrooms and picking up trash. And, with a horrible gang problem, cuts to the police or fire departments were out of the question.

"It was devastating to be part of that decision," said Lutes, who is a fifth-grade teacher.

City officials made the decision to close all three libraries, but that touched a nerve. Actor Bill Murray donated \$12,500 he won at a golf tournament at Pebble Beach, \$600,000 was raised to keep the doors open until December and city officials found support to put a half-cent sales tax on the November ballot to bail out the libraries.

Even though the libraries appear to be headed back to good health, Lutes said donations such as those from the inmates are still critical because the earliest any money from the proposed tax will be available is next July.

"We were overwhelmed," she said.

Tunstall said Albertsons, Costco, Krispy Kreme Donuts, McMichael's Sourdough Sandwiches and Extreme Pizza gave them deals on everything from trail mix to pizzas to cans of chili. A menu was passed around for a month detailing what could be ordered and, on May 25, inmates met on the yard to pick up their goods.

"It's better than what we get in here," Tunstall said with a laugh.

Jeff Miller, who owns the Extreme Pizza restaurants in Novato and San Rafael, attended last night's event. He said he and another employee got up at 4 a.m. that day, made more than 100 large pizzas and delivered them to the prison by 8 a.m.

"They were all combos," he said. "It was the most expensive stuff we sell."

Before everyone sat down to a dinner of sandwiches and cake, Barwood told the inmates she was inspired by what they achieved and planned to use the money toward literacy projects such as the one many of them are in.

"We'll make sure it goes to good use," she said.