

## Emily Jacobson

# The Meaning of Public in Public Library

**E**mily Jacobson '07 pursued a degree in Creative Writing with a focus on poetry at Purchase because she loved reading and writing and simply wanted to be a participant in that world.

But it was her curiosity coupled with her desire to share knowledge that would draw her into the world she now inhabits—as a Jail & Prison Services Librarian at The New York Public Library (NYPL), serving its patrons who are incarcerated. Originally from Rochester, Jacobson was integral to opening the first dedicated library space for women on Rikers Island.

### A Winding Path to Purpose

After graduating from Purchase, Jacobson wasn't quite sure what to do next. She briefly ventured into journalism, but soon discovered the leap from creative writing to reporting wasn't necessarily a natural crossover. But she did notice coming home from work and "finding a lot of solace in rearranging my bookshelves." So she enrolled in the Library Science Master's program at Pratt Institute and graduated in 2012.

As part of her program, she interned in several different roles within the library setting, such as in archives, specialized libraries, and digital information architecture, all of which helped her define what she didn't want to do. Her work in the Jail & Prison Services department really stuck, however. "At the end of the day, talking to people about what they like to read and helping connect them to the information they need is what I found most fulfilling, and that's public library work."

### Service On Site

The work of the Jail & Prison Services department at the NYPL is primarily done in the jails on Rikers Island. Before the pandemic, Rikers operated between eight and 10 jails for men and the Rose M. Singer Center, or Rosies, the single jail for women. Because jails serve a transient population—those who can't make bail are remanded or are sentenced and are waiting to be sent to prison—the library services look different in each jail.

The women's jail, for instance, had only a pushcart, which severely limited the number of people they could serve in the facility. Yet a dedicated library space seemed unlikely. Through what she describes as "perseverance and luck," it eventually became a reality. "I think the stars just kind of aligned. We talked with enough people, and at one point there was staff who were willing to help us go through all of the bureaucratic obstacles to make it happen."

The permanent space has bookshelves, plants, and posters, and each housing unit is brought there once a week to browse and check out books. This has allowed the library to expand widely the number of patrons they serve.

But it's not your typical library. There's one huge hindrance: as in most jails and prisons, there are no electronics allowed. Without such, Jacobson can't rely on computers to help find books or keep track of loans. "All of our circulation is done by hand. I write down everything that people check out and the next week, they return it and I cross it off. It's very low-fi." And specific requests could be an obstacle. "It's kind of a challenge, too, if someone asks, 'I'm looking for that book with that character who's the detective who does this, this, and this.' You can't look it up; you just sort of have to know."

### Service By Mail

The NYPL's Jail & Prison Services department also operates a Reference by Mail program for those in New York State's prisons, most of which are upstate. Nearly half of those incarcerated in prison are New York City residents. "We consider them our patrons before and after their incarceration, so we want to try and cover the gap during as well," says Jacobson.

Again, with no internet access in prison, she describes the service as Google by mail. Jacobson and a team of staff and volunteers research and reply to roughly 50 letters a week by mail, responding to a range of questions, from the practical to the philosophical. "Some questions are pretty straightforward: someone wants to replace their birth certificate from Puerto Rico, or someone wants to open a car wash when they get released, so what are the steps needed. Some of them are more general-interest questions that are so beautiful and so interesting." One inquiry was about the strength of aquarium glass and how it's made, and another was about how someone who makes their own font could copyright and promote it. "There's always something different and it's always really interesting to see what people are asking."

Jacobson appreciates how the work is direct, even though it's not face-to-face. And she finds it powerful that so many patrons trust the library with their needs and interests. While the librarians may have access to information, they hold no hierarchy over knowledge. "No one ever asked me anything where I just knew the answer. I always have to look it up and research it for people," she says. "Knowledge and information are the only commodities that don't diminish the more they're shared. Why shouldn't everyone have access to and opportunity for that?"

Looking forward, she hopes to see the kind of work she does become the norm. "I would love for library staff to see incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people as a core group of library users, and serving them and doing programs like these is expected and normal."

Jacobson admits she finds it hard to carve out time for her poetry practice. But when she does, it's truly rewarding.

"It still feels like alchemy for me, like magic and affirming." There's no underestimating the power of words on a page and the joy and satisfaction they can bring to anyone, anywhere.

