On following your passion I worry about our students now because they're always told, "Don't follow your passion. You've got to be practical." You do. You have to be savvy and recognize that you have to be able to pay the rent, but I don't want to give up the hope that we can find ways to be both practical and passionate in our lives.

On the importance of books They provide us with imaginative access to an experience other than our own and that itself can enhance our empathy and our ability to imagine lives beyond our own. But the curious thing about reading is that, at the same time it's transportive and can be a kind of imaginative escape, it always also bears on our own lives in some ways. That's the curious paradox of reading: it's both a "not me" experience and a "me" experience.

On the most requested book The dictionary is the most requested book by far. If we did a count, it's somewhere near a third of our letters that ask for a dictionary. It's such an important resource for reading and for thinking.

On new developments We just started a book club at Hazleton (prison). We read our first novel—*Kindred* by Octavia Butler—and the conversation was hands-down one of the best discussions of literature I've ever witnessed. It's not an easy book, and they had absorbed it entirely and were able to talk about it in such insightful ways. It was stunning.

On the project's future I hope the Appalachian Prison Book Project will continue to grow and develop as an educational justice center in some ways. We'll always do this primary needed work of sending books because it's just so needed. It's so important to get these books through the walls.

Katy Ryan

*Katy Ryan sits* in a small room lined floor to ceiling with books, sifting through some of the hundreds of letters the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP) receives each week. Some ask for books on history, calligraphy, or science fiction. Others express gratitude for books received, and for the human connection formed by the exchange of words on paper. For Katy, it's these letters that inform and guide the project she and her WVU students and colleagues began back in 2004. Since then the APBP has gone from working out of a student's apartment to functioning as an official nonprofit organization. More than 15,000 books have been sent to those incarcerated in West Virginia, Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee, and the letters are the tangible proof of their effect.

Katy came to WVU in 2000 after completing her Ph.D. at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She was recently recognized for her research on matters of justice and human rights in 20th century American literature—as well as her involvement with the APBP—as the recipient of WVU's Neil S. Bucklew Award. The honor is awarded to someone who's demonstrated outstanding leadership, courage, and continuous support in the area of social justice. Her essays have appeared in numerous literary journals, and *Demands of the Dead: Executions, Storytelling, and Activism in the United States*, a collection of creative and critical writing on the death penalty she edited, was published in 2012. She also organized the Educational Justice & Appalachian Prisons Symposium that took place at WVU in April 2014.

*written and photographed by Elizabeth Roth*

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**How You Can Help**

Volunteer training takes place every Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Aull Center.

aprilsonbookproject.wordpress.com