



New Jersey Department of Corrections

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Freedom Reads Partners with Princeton University Library Open First Freedom Libraries in New Jersey Prisons

National non-profit Freedom Reads to open nine Freedom Libraries at Garden State Correctional Facility; Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts to perform his one-man show FELON: An American Washi Tale.

HAMDEN, Conn., May 13, 2024 – On May 15, the national non-profit [Freedom Reads](#), with generous support from [Princeton University Library](#), opened nine Freedom Libraries at Garden State Correctional Facility, a [New Jersey Department of Corrections](#) state prison for adults in Chesterfield, Burlington County. To date, Freedom Reads has opened 303 Freedom Libraries in 37 prisons across 10 states. These will be the first Freedom Libraries opened in the New Jersey correctional system. The libraries will be placed in the facilities' housing units for unfettered access to the 500-book collection. When the libraries are opened May 15, the event will be accompanied by a performance by Betts of *FELON: An American Washi Tale* for those incarcerated at the prison.

The brainchild of 2021 MacArthur Fellow and Yale Law School graduate Reginald Dwayne Betts, who was sentenced in Virginia to nine years in prison at age 16, Freedom Libraries seek to create a space in prisons to encourage community and in which reaching for a book can be as spontaneous as human curiosity. Each bookcase is handcrafted out of maple, walnut or cherry and is curved to contrast the straight lines and bars of prisons as well as to evoke Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s observation about the "arc of the universe" bending "toward justice."

"Freedom Reads is, as I am personally, tremendously grateful to Princeton and the Princeton University Library for their continuing support over years," said Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts. "This ongoing support helped make possible a powerful theater adaption of one of my poetry collections that we now bring to incarcerated adults and kids in prisons across the nation. It is therefore most fitting that Princeton University Library joins us as we partner with the New Jersey Department of Corrections to open the first Freedom Libraries in the New Jersey prison system."

"We express our gratitude to Freedom Reads and Princeton University Library for generously donating these library collections," said Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq. "These donated books are more than just resources – they're tools for transformation. Within their pages lie the potential to empower minds, unlock opportunities, and cultivate a culture of learning that fosters rehabilitation, reintegration, and a brighter future."

In 2021, Betts, in residence at the [Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University](#), and working specifically with Jane Cox, Director of Princeton University's Program in Theater and Music Theater, and Elise Thoron, Co-Founding Artistic Director of [Literature to Life](#), adapted Bett's NAACP Image Award-winning poetry collection *FELON* into his solo theater piece *FELON: An American Washi Tale*. In the performance, Betts explores the lingering consequences of having a criminal record, fatherhood,

the power of literature, and love. In March 2023, performances of the show were held over three days at Princeton, together with related events and an exhibition co-sponsored by numerous Princeton University departments and organizations, including the Princeton University Library.

“It was an honor to participate in the development of Betts’ first work for the stage,” said Cox. “*FELON: An American Washi Tale* powerfully demonstrated to our students how performance can bring varied communities together and humanize critical issues.”

“Princeton University Library is proud to provide support for the first Freedom Libraries in New Jersey,” said Anne Jarvis, Dean of Libraries and Robert H. Taylor University Librarian. “Collaborating with organizations like Freedom Reads to promote opportunities to read and discover is a critical part of our mission.”

Freedom Reads is a first-of-its-kind organization that empowers people in prison through literature to imagine new possibilities for their lives. Books in the Freedom Library have been carefully curated through consultations with hundreds of poets, novelists, philosophers, teachers, friends, and voracious readers, resulting in a collection of books that are not only beloved, but indispensable. The libraries include contemporary poets, novelists, and essayists alongside classic works from Homer’s *The Odyssey* to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* – titles that remind us that the book has long been a freedom project.

About Freedom Reads:

Founded by Reginald Dwayne Betts, who knows firsthand the dispiriting forces of prison, Freedom Reads works to empower people through literature to confront what prison does to the spirit. Inspired by the recognition that freedom begins with a book, Freedom Reads supports the efforts of people in prison to transform their lives through increased access to books and writers. For more information about Freedom Reads and the Freedom Libraries project, please visit <https://freedomreads.org>.

About Princeton University Library:

Princeton University Library (PUL) (<http://library.princeton.edu/>) is one of the world’s leading research libraries. It employs a dedicated & knowledgeable staff of more than 300 professional & support staff working in a large central library, 9 specialized branches, & 3 storage facilities. Through a combination of exemplary services & world-renowned collections PUL supports a diverse community of 5200 undergraduates, 2700 graduate students, 1200 faculty members, & many visiting scholars. Holdings include over 10 million printed volumes, 5 million manuscripts, 2 million nonprint items, & extensive collections of digital text, data, & images.

About New Jersey Department of Corrections:

The mission of the New Jersey Department of Corrections is advancing public safety and promoting successful reintegration in a dignified, safe, secure, rehabilitative, and gender-informed environment, supported by a professional, trained, and diverse workforce, enhanced by community engagement.