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From the Los Angeles Times

Cards for inmates say it all for you

Though some might think they're just for a good laugh, the greeting cards were designed to make it easy to communicate with loved ones in prison.

Sandy Banks

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The cards displayed on the bookstore rack stopped me in my tracks. They shared a simple cover drawing -- a delicate yellow rose with a barbed-wire stem -- but their greetings suggested an unconventional audience:

"Sorry to Hear About Your Arrest."

"NOT YOU!"

"Money on Your Books."

I was struck by the bluntness of the messages inside: "Honestly, I never knew anyone who was arrested before," one read. Said another: "I know that I have not visited you. But I still care about you. . . . When are you getting out anyway??"

I stood with my daughter, reading them aloud and joking about the comic possibilities they provided: "Sorry about your arrest. I guess the shoot-out wasn't such a good idea." Or, "Too bad I can't hide a file in your cake. Happy Birthday anyway!"

It's easy to poke fun at the notion of Hallmark-like greetings for miscreants. But Terrye Cheathem didn't create Three Squares Greetings: For Those Who Can't Come Home as a joke.

"When I hear somebody laugh at them," Cheathem said, "I know that person hasn't gotten the telephone call, yet, saying their son or brother or nephew has been arrested."

Cheathem is a lawyer from a middle-class family. She grew up in Compton in the 1960s and '70s -- before the city's streets were considered a pipeline to the penitentiary -- studied psychology at Pepperdine and earned a degree from UC Hastings College of the Law. She's spent plenty of time in courtrooms and jails, as a criminal defense attorney in private practice and as a legal advisor for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

But it was her brother-in-law's incarceration seven years ago that sparked her entrepreneurial vision. She was asked to write to him, but didn't know what to say. She browsed her local Hallmark store in Ladera Heights, but "everything was way too cheerful," she said.

She spent several years, and \$30,000, researching, designing and promoting her two lines of Three Squares cards -- one for families and friends to send, and another to be sold in prison canteens to inmates who want to express thanks or confess regrets. . . or just apologize for embarrassing family and friends.

The cards were a big hit at a national convention of prison officials last summer. Wardens appreciated their simplicity. No glitter or glue, no folding flaps or cutesy pop-ups that could hide contraband.

They have *not* been a hit with local merchants. Cheatham has made the rounds in South Los Angeles, but only two places have agreed to carry the cards -- Eso Won Books, where I spotted them, and a Copy Plus store on Slauson.

The owner of an Inglewood car wash refused to add them to her greeting card display, Cheatham said, because she worried it would play into stereotypes. "She told me 'I'm just afraid that people will think they're only here because we're in Inglewood.' "

Ironically, Cheatham once was worried that someone would beat her to market with the idea, given the, shall we say, captive national audience of 2.2 million convicts and the friends and families they represent. When Martha Stewart was locked up, Cheatham moaned, imagining that Stewart would emerge from prison with her own tasteful "Graybar Motel" line of cards.

She's surprised that other greeting card makers haven't tapped the market. After all, Hallmark's new "Journeys Through Life" line -- "real life cards for real life situations" -- offers everything from support for cancer patients ("No one said it would be easy to lose your hair") to 12-steppers ("Every day of treatment and recovery deserves a trophy").

But it's one thing to support someone who is battling depression or applaud what one card calls the "courage" it takes to come out of the closet, and another to reach out to convicts whose own stupidity -- or greed or cruelty -- has landed them behind bars.

Cheatham has sold only 15 cards since rolling out the line at a Crenshaw-area book festival last spring. There, as she watched would-be customers silently debate a purchase, she realized that the biggest obstacle her company faces is not cost or marketing, but the difficulty buyers have with publicly acknowledging a criminal in their family tree.

"I could always tell when somebody needed the card; all of a sudden their face would change," she said. "It's a sudden brush with reality."

She recalled one elegant older woman who stopped by to study the cards, but rushed away without buying after someone recognized her. "I found out she's a judge. Her son is in prison for murder."

I found that story sobering. I'd considered her cards a joke, aimed at making it easy for the illiterate friends of tatted-up, tough-talking hoodlums to stay in touch.

But Cheatham's cards convey sorrow, regret and bewilderment, along with prayerful encouragement. They're for ordinary people who don't understand what caused a friend to go astray. And for disappointed parents who can't bear to visit a child behind bars; can't make that leap to "I love you, son" because they feel angry and disgraced.

"Parents are profoundly embarrassed when their kids mess up. Families are hurt. Friends don't know what to say. . . . You have someone who's broken the law, done something awful. This is a way to reach out, tell them you care, without ratifying their conduct," says Cheatham, ever the lawyer.

I expect her sales will pick up next month when she starts selling the cards online, where buyers can wrestle privately over whether to extend a greeting to an outlaw.

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