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Club gives students with relatives in prison a safe place: ‘You have ... people there that can support you’

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Steel-High High School assistant principal Jennifer Morrison is a club advisor for "POPS the Club" at the school. With her are students Kennedy King, left, and her sister Reagen King. The Pain of the Prison System club is for students who have loved ones in prison. The club give students a pace to express thier experience through writing and art. February 12, 2021. Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com

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Growing up, sisters Reagan and Kennedy King would sometimes find themselves in an awkward conversation with friends and classmates when it came to grandparents.

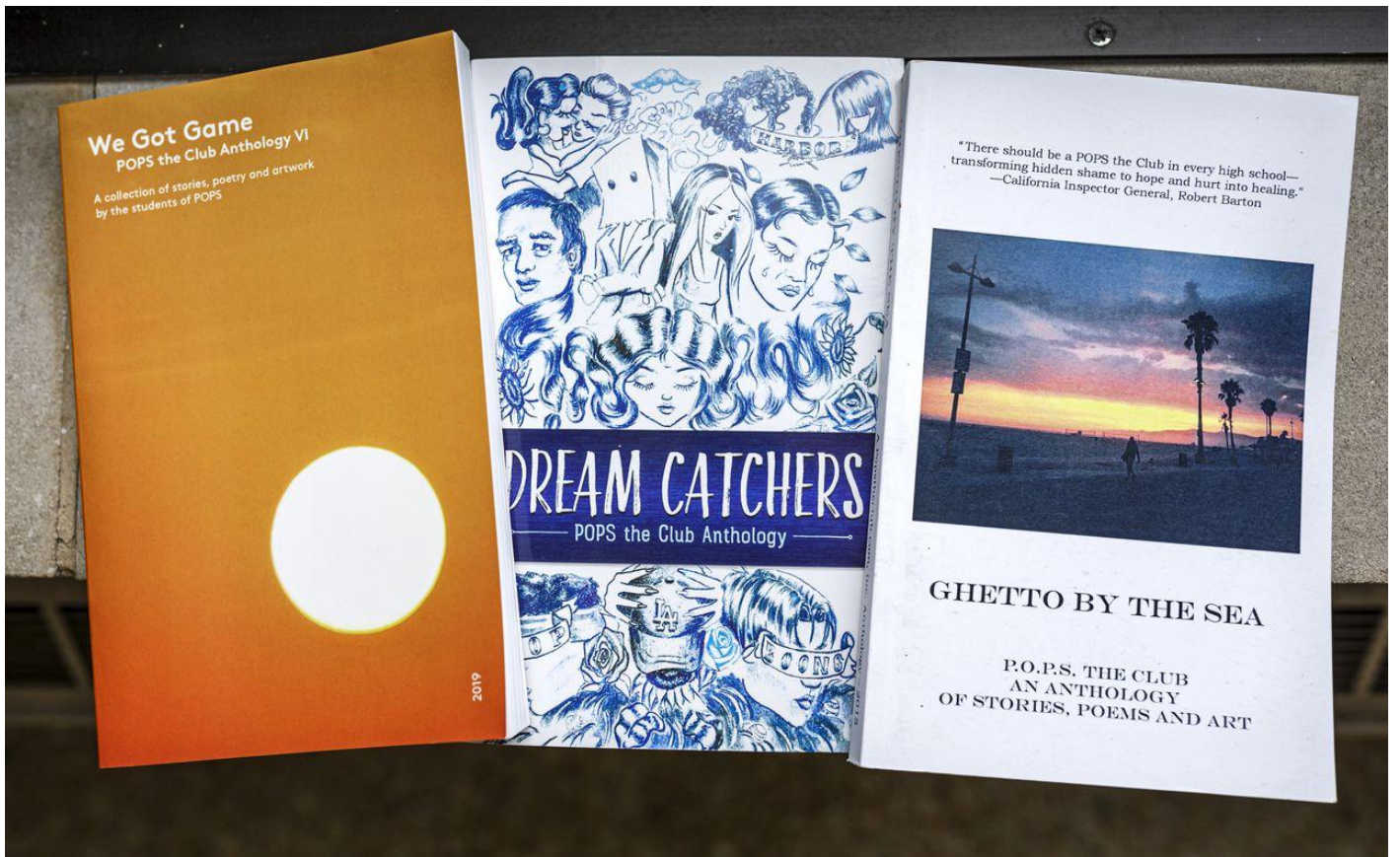
“It almost felt like I never had grandparents to talk about,” Kennedy said “When people would ask about it, I had to say, ‘One’s in jail’. It was always like, ‘Well, why is he in jail?’ and I didn’t want to answer those questions.”

“I was never embarrassed, per se,” Reagan said. “But it was hard, because I never understood when I was younger. Now that I’m older and I do understand, it takes a little toll. I just think, ‘are we ever going to be able to meet him? Are we going to be able to have a conversation face to face? Am I ever going to be able to hug him?’ It’s just something that wanders in my mind.”

“People who have loved ones in prison are left behind,” said Heather Bobula, a volunteer at Steelton-Highspire High School and co-founder of the school’s chapter of [POPS the Club](#). “They are, all of a sudden, down a parent or a loved one. They are alive, but not part of the child’s life anymore. Sometimes for a short period of time, but sometimes for longer. As a child who experienced this myself, I can tell you that it comes with a lot of shame sometimes. A lot of guilt. And a lot of hurt.”

A few years ago, Bobula joined with Jennifer Morrison, then the school’s art teacher, [to found a chapter of POPS the Club at Steelton-Highspire](#). The group meets regularly to offer a safe place for students affected by incarceration of a family member or loved one.

“POPS stands for Pain of the Prison System,” said Amy Friedman, executive director of national organization. “The organization was named by members of the first club launched in 2013 at Venice High School; they wanted the name to reflect both the pain they experience and the pleasure and ‘pop’/energy of their gatherings.”



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Friedman explained that she founded POPS the Club eight years ago, and in that time several chapters have formed both in southern California, Georgia, New York and Alaska. The Steelton-Highspire club, launched in 2015, is so far the only chapter in Pennsylvania.

The number of children across the country with family members in prison may be larger than you think. The National Institute of Corrections, a part of the U.S. Department of Justice, estimates that more than five million children in the U.S. have had at least one parent in prison at some point, and that one in 50 children has a parent currently incarcerated. When you consider siblings, grandparents and other close family members, the numbers are even higher.

Students at POPS the Club meetings are welcomed to share or discuss their feelings and participate in group activities such as art or writing projects. Some activities involve poems or other writing prompts; other projects include bowls that students write on, then break and glue back together — a metaphor that the King sisters say speaks to their own family's experiences.

“Every kid is different,” Morrison said about how students join or participate in POPS the Club. “Every kid has to find that moment where they’re finally comfortable to talk about it — or they might not even want to talk about it at all. They just might want to listen to other people, and that’s okay too.”

The writing and art of members of several POPS the Club groups is gathered and published in annual anthologies. The most recent, “Dreamcatchers,” features art and writing by the King sisters as well as other members of the Steelton chapter.

“For 20 years, I was an art teacher, and I believe very strongly in the power of art as an outlet for kids to express their feelings and emotions and desires,” Morrison said. “We don’t want kids to think, ‘what’s wrong with me?’ because they have somebody who’s in prison. There’s a stigma that’s attached to it. We want kids to share their stories with other people, so that they know that they’re walking around these halls with other people that are living a very similar life.”



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Morrison, now an assistant principal at the school, added that she has seen members of the club grow in various ways. In addition to processing their feelings of grief, shame or confusion, she said, she has seen students grow academically, connect

socially and gain confidence.

“When I first met Kennedy, she was very, very, very shy,” Morrison said. “Very sweet and would talk to you individually, but to ask her to talk in front of a group would never have been something that I would have thought that she was comfortable with. And she actually really wowed us all. We got invited to Central Penn College — they invited our kids to read on stage, like a poetry evening reading event. It was a very full house, and Kennedy and another one of our students got on stage, and read some work from the anthology of that year.”

“At first, for a lot of people I’m sure, you don’t want to talk about what you feel,” Kennedy said. “But when one person starts getting it rolling, and they start expressing, and then the next person goes, it all comes together. It really helps get you open and get you going. So when a friend shares that they felt abandoned or lonely, or just, you know, like the oddball, it helps me express that I felt that way too sometimes. And [before POPS the Club], I felt like there wasn’t many people I can go to to talk about this situation.”

“I see growth in our kids,” Bobula said. “They do better in school, they find self-confidence, and they make friends. We’ve become a pretty tight-knit group over the years, and I’ve been so proud to see the kids grow. For me, it isn’t just about helping them through this one part of their lives. I want to see them do well in life after high school, too. I’ve been impressed with their grades getting better, and with kids talking about different plans for after high school. In the beginning, we had kids who said there was no way they would go to college or could ever afford it. We’ve been able to talk to them about those things, and now many of our kids are having a change of heart.”

Both Kennedy and Reagan expressed how much the club and camaraderie has helped them, and both hope that that the “Dreamcatchers” anthology can spread a message of support to others.

“It makes me feel inspiring, and that I can someday help someone else come out and they talk about how they feel,” Reagan said. “And that you don’t have to. You don’t have to always talk about it, but you could always write it out and express your feelings that way. And that you have a lot of people there that can support you.”

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