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Mother's Day like no other - in prison

by Tom Roberts



Jeanette Broughton and three-year-old son Jacob

With just under an hour to go in the two hour bus ride southeast from the San Francisco area to Chowchilla, Calif., site of two large women's prisons, 15-year-old Tajanae is finishing a long note on a mother's day card.

She was one of hundreds of children who participated in the 12th annual Get-on-the-Bus program May 7 that brings children, who silently share the sentence when a parent is incarcerated, to mother's day weekend reunions at prisons throughout the state.

Tajanae and her three siblings, 11-year-old twin sisters, Unique and Janique, and their 12-year-old brother, Jaquan, have made the annual trip to Valley State Prison for several years of their mother's sentence. Sabrina Fletcher has been in for six years and expects to be released at the end of 2015.

Jaquan said he was looking forward to hanging out and talking with her, giving her a hug and a kiss. We take pictures, and she keeps some of them.

The Get-on-the-Bus program was born in 1999 when Sister of St. Joseph Suzanne Jabro, now executive director of the Center for Restorative Justice Works, along with Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Gabino Zavala and other religious leaders of the area noticed a 500 percent spike in the number of women going to prison in California during the previous decade. They took a trip to the Central California Women's Facility, across the road from Valley State, met with some of the inmates and asked what they could do help them while they were in prison.

It was an easy decision. They were crying, weeping and begging us: Let us see our children, said Jabro, watching from the sidelines this year at a gymnasium full of mothers and children at Valley State Prison. I said we ought to be able to get a bus here.

And they did, in 2000, a bus with 17 children and chaperones to visit 9 women chosen by the prison.

This year, the program sent 24 buses loaded with kids to unite with hundreds of moms. It is a day part family reunion, part picnic, and mostly a rush to cram as much normalcy as mothers and children can in to a four-to-five hour span. There's face painting and games Chutes and Ladders, Candyland, Monopoly, and face painting and coloring, and endless snacks and lunch with mom and hugs that never end.

The unspoken question seems to be: How much of a year's deficit of affirmation and questions can anyone cram into this time? And there are family photos to be taken, and mothers sit for minutes just drinking in the prints that arrive, just gazing at them. And it all eventually bumps up against the inevitable awful goodbye. One more separation, rivers of tears, heartbreak and elation all mixed together.



They came young, perhaps the youngest a two-month-old girl born in the prison hospital and returned to her mother for the first time since birth by a family member. Three-year-old Jacob slept in the arms of his mother, Jeanette Broughton, for most of the morning. He was part of a double mother's day reunion. Jeanette's mother, Zeida Calvo, who's caring for Jacob while her daughter is in prison, has been a constant support and brought the youngster to visit.

The visitors included 21-year-old Marcel Nelson, whose mother and father have been in California's prison system most of his life. His father was never in his life much at the start and has been in and out of prison for most of it.

His mother got 15-years to life. He doesn't want to talk about the offense, says she never told him what it was, but he knows that it was at some point when she got angry and let her temper get the best of her. What he knows is that people make mistakes and sometimes they have to pay for them. He did, too, during his teenage years. The second drug arrest woke him up. He didn't want to follow his mother to



prison.

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That, he said, was the turning point. He put away the anger that once welled up when he couldn't figure out why she wasn't around, the anger when he saw other kids' mothers picking them up at school or coming along on field trips. There was a realization earlier that while some kids cried to get parents to come to them, in this case every time I cried it didn't happen. His mother couldn't hear him. His grandmother, Pat Dockery, on his father's side, was his support and encouragement. And he eventually found a program made up of other kids whose parents were in prison. Finally he wasn't alone with what he recalls as the hardest thing growing up - telling his peers that his mom and dad were in prison.

He graduated from high school, has taken some courses in junior college and is trying to put the money together to continue classes in criminal justice. He's been working for the past three years for the same diversion program, McCullum Youth Court that provided an alternative to prison as a juvenile. His mother's proud of him, he says. He turned out to be the kind of man she wanted him to be.

On the long ride home from the day's visit, he gets an unexpected call, from his father, who's in Folsom Prison near Sacramento. He's proud of him, too, and glad he's been to visit his mother.

Roberts is NCR Editor-at-Large. A longer version of this story and more reporting on prisons and prison ministry will appear in future issues of NCR.

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