



I TOUCH  
YOUR FACE  
— *in my* —  
DREAMS

WRITINGS BY CHILDREN & YOUTH  
WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

The number of children with a parent in prison has increased more than fifty percent since 1991. There are currently over 2 million kids with a parent incarcerated in prison or jail, and more than 7 million children have a parent under some form of correctional supervision. The majority of these are young children: fifty-eight percent are younger than 10 years old.

Approximately seventy-five percent of incarcerated women are mothers, and two-thirds have children under the age of 18. Over fifty percent of mothers in state prisons said they never had visits from their children. About fifty-five percent of men in prison are fathers of children under the age of 18, and a majority of them also reported that they have had no visits from their children.

Children are some of the invisible victims of the incarceration boom in the U.S. When a parent is incarcerated there is often a sense of shame and confusion. Many families were already short on money, and sink further into poverty with a loved one's incarceration. This is a time when these children and their families most need help. On top of all this, maintaining ties between prisoners and their families is difficult at best. Too many prisons are located in remote areas without public transportation. When visits are managed, the conditions can be very stressful for children.

The prison population of the United States has risen dramatically in the past twenty years. It is still rising. For each new prisoner, there is a family and, often, children left behind. A parent's incarceration has a huge effect on a child, as witnessed by the words of the young writers you are about to read. We hope you will take some time, listen to their voices, and think of what you can do to support these youth and their families.

*Brigette Sarabi*

Executive Director

## P R E F A C E

In the following pages you will hear the voices of children dealing with the incarceration of a family member. The strength, resilience and determination of these kids are incredible.

This publication came about because of my seven years of working with children dealing with these difficult circumstances. They are not treated as victims of crime, but in many ways they are hurt the most by it. I have witnessed the tears of a child going to visit her mother on mother's day, only to be coldly turned away because she had metal bobby pins in her hair. I have comforted a young girl who sobbed, not wanting to leave her mommy after a rare visit. I have heard the stories of siblings being separated due to guardianship issues upon their parent's incarceration. I have heard statements of loneliness, isolation and despair. Their stories are heartbreaking, sad, funny, honest and sincere. Their scars are deep, but you wouldn't know it by the smiles on their faces.

I wanted to give these kids an opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. They deserve recognition for their strong spirit and strength of mind. I hope that you can take away from this a sense of understanding and compassion for these children and the struggles they have faced. Family members often describe their lives while their loved one is incarcerated as serving time with them. Incarceration not only hurts the prisoner who is "locked in," but also those who are "locked out."

Thank you for your support of these kids. They so greatly deserve it.

*Rachel Pearl*  
Project Director

# PRIZE WINNERS

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## 6-9 YEAR OLD CATEGORY:

Audrehanna, 1st place

Ashanti, 2nd place

## 10-14 YEAR OLD CATEGORY:

Casey, 1st place

Maria, 2nd place (tie)

Kathryn, 2nd place (tie)

## 15-18 YEAR OLD CATEGORY:

Taniesha, 1st place (tie)

Travis, 1st place (tie)

Chad, 2nd place

# ASHANTI

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7 YEARS OLD

I feel sad because my mom is in jail. The only time I visit her is with the girl scouts. It is kind of boring but I get to see my mom. It is hard because we have to go through metal detectors and if you wear metal you can't see your mom. When she gets out if I don't make up my decision I will not get to see her because she wants to know who I want to live with. I do want to live with her.

# NADASIA

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7 YEARS OLD

When my mom was gone I was always crying. I wanted to see her. I always called her when she came home. I was happy and we went to my cousin house and had a pardee and took pictures.

# TEAIRHA

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7 YEARS OLD

When my mom was in jail it made me sad because I missed her so much I accidently made mistakes that my grandma was my mom. It was a little bit better when my mom went to jail because I actually saw her. She was a little bit better mom when she was in jail because she didn't tell me to wear a coat when it was just a little bit cold. And it was better because me and my grandma were just alone and I liked that.

# AUDREHANNA

8 YEARS OLD

When I visit my mom I feel very happy. When I heard my mom was in prison I was crying. It took 1 year until I could see my mom because I can't see her because she had drugs in her purse when we got in a bad car accident and me and my brother were hurt badly. I'm going to visit every two weeks. It's been really hard for me. Sometime I get angry. When I started visiting my mom I meet other girls like me and it made it easier for me and it changed my life.

# DEJA

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8 YEARS OLD

I feel sad because I don't get to see my grandma everyday. Soon she will be out of jail and we will have fun. We will go to the mall, Grandma Jackie will walk me to school and we will have fun. I never met her before I went to girl scouts.

# MARQUE

10 YEARS OLD

My mom was in prison and  
only one friend came.

My mom was crying and  
in lots of pain.

My mom got kicked out of  
treatment and had to stay longer.

I did not like the news,

Now I was in pain and anger

That's the poem I wrote

While I had a soar throat.

# MELANIE

11 YEARS OLD

My aunt is in prison and it is very hard for me but it is harder for my cousins and her but I visit her every 2 weeks for girl scouts and I wish she was out of jail tomorrow but she's not but she will be in there for 2 more years but she might get out early but she won't know until December. It is fun to visit her. She is active and very humorous and fun. She is very artistic and adventurous. She loves her family and so do I. Well, that's my life.

# RENA

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10 YEARS OLD

When I visit my sister it makes me happy because I get to see her and because I hadn't seen her in a long time before she finally got sentenced. She's been in "coffee creek correctional facility" for about a year and a half. Everyone misses her a lot. My mom cries almost every night because she misses my sister so much. I miss her a lot too. My mom can't see my sister though because she used to be in jail. But my sister is really happy that she gets to see my every other Saturday. She's my most favorite sister. P.S. I made lots of new friends when I visited her and I'm still making new ones.

# CASEY

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12 YEARS OLD

## MY DAD

My dad has always been there for me spiritually and emotionally even when he couldn't be there physically. He has helped me to discover my fears and become a better Christian. He tells me right from wrong, and helps me when I'm down. If it wasn't for him and the Holy Father I would be lost today, I would be a very troubled teen.

I feel that the most helpful thing my father has done for me is help me get my priorities straight; my top three priorities are Jesus, education, and communication. He has helped me get better at keeping those priorities straight by writing me a lot and telling me to keep Jesus in my heart, and to pay attention at school. Also to communicate more. My dad has always supported me no matter what; he encourages me to try new things and to read more. He also keeps up with what's going on in my life (or at least he tries). Sometimes even when I don't get to write back he writes me consistent letters, which makes me feel so very loved!

I really want my dad to be able to see me grow up, although I believe that even though we are separated our relationship as father and daughter is always growing. We are becoming extremely close, we are like best friends now more than ever, I don't think I could ever have the same kind of bond me and my father have with anyone else. I am his princess and he is my dad and we will be close forever even when he is gone! In the near future I hope to see my dad because I haven't seen him in over a year, I miss him a lot, and hope he gets out soon!

# KATHRYN

13 YEARS OLD

## DRUGS DESTROY MORE THAN YOUR MIND

I learned in DARE that drugs are any substance beside food that affects the way your mind and body works. Drugs also destroy families, as it did mine.

When my mother was very young she got into doing drugs. She is in prison now. I have a little brother who was adopted, just like me. But my brother wasn't as lucky as me, because he was adopted by some family we did not know. I, on the other hand, was adopted by my great Aunt. I was adopted when I was a baby. My brother was adopted when he was a little older. I lived with my aunt and uncle for a few years until my uncle went to prison because of drugs.

I call my aunt and uncle Mom and Dad because they are the only parents I've ever had, but I get to talk to my real mom on the phone once in awhile, but don't really know her because she has been there so long. I have never met my real dad and never will, because he died from an overdose. Because of drugs, my life has been a mess, and will never be the same.

I hope everyone will know that drugs don't just hurt your lungs, but they hurt your lives and families. I hope everyone in Helena is not like the people in my family and will stay away from drugs.

Also in DARE I learned that the consequences are the result of something you do or choose not to do. Choose not to do drugs, just because of the consequences. We should all believe in ourselves enough to know we don't need drugs.

I hope after you read my story, you will know what happens to families when drugs are involved, and you will not do drugs.

# LAFAWN

AGE 14

My name is Lafawn and my mom is at Coffee Creek. She gets out in 2 years. I feel real sad because my mom has been gone and I cry sometimes cause my mom is not at home. It makes me sad to know my mom has to be in prison. I went there to visit her for the tace event and we had lots of fun. We ate popcorn, cotton candy and made a bar bi que. My aunt was there and all my cousins and my big sister got to go there too! It was fun because we got to all be together for the day. We took pictures with my mom. I was sad to have to leave my mom again but now I see her with Girl Scouts too. My mom let me go live in Montana for the summer and now I am back. My mom loves me and my sisters and I can't wait till she comes home. I never want my mom to leave us again. We need you mother. Come home and be good so you don't go back to prison. I love you mom.

# MARIA RUIZ

AGE 13

My mom has been in prison for 3 years and she gets out in November 2006 from Coffee Creek. For me, not having my mom around has been very hard. I get very sad and think about my mom all the time and wish she was home with us kids. My sister and I live with my dad and he works all night and sleeps all day. I also have a big sister who lives in Montana. It is hard because before my mom had a good job at Chemawa School as a counselor and we was always doing things like going to the parks or going swimming and having bbq's. Now we don't do much of anything. Sometimes I have things I need to talk about and I can't. I hate drugs because that is why my mom is in prison and my sister is in Montana. I wish there was no drugs in the world. I see my mom with Girl Scouts Program every 2 weeks so that helps me a lot. We at least get to see our mom. It's a good program for mom & kids. It gives us time to be a family for a little while. But after I see her it's hard to leave again. I love my mom and am waiting for her to come home. All kids need their mom at home. I love you so much mom!

Love, Maria

# SHAYLEEN

The biggest thing that affected my life, wasn't just a one time thing it's actually gone on my whole life. What is it, you ask? Well this might take awhile so you might want to have a seat.

Well you see I've really never had a mom or dad. I've had a grandma and grandpa. I mean I have a mom and dad, they've just never really been around. My mom and dad have been in and out of mine and my little brother's life for all of our lives so far. I used to think that my mom was too busy to realize she had two wonderful kids. That she was too wrapped up in the wrong things and that she didn't even care. By saying the wrong things, I'm sorry to say that I mean drugs. See when she was on drugs she was always busy, with her friends or sometimes she was even in jail. The only thing that would go through my mind when my mom's friends would come to the door to tell us that my mom was in jail, is ok, great, my mom's gone again. That's not the kinda thing that should go through a kid's mind.

I have actually tried living with my mom in the past and it didn't work as well as I hoped. I mean when I was laying in bed about to go to sleep and I knew that my mom was right across the room, it still felt like she was so far away that I couldn't reach her, couldn't touch her, and couldn't talk to her cause she wouldn't hear me. I eventually had to move back in with my grandparents. At first I was upset, but now I see it was the best thing for me, cause my mom needed help.

My dad has a little bit of a different story than my mom. And it's worse. Well, where do I start, I might as well just spit it out, he was a bank robber. Not the best job in the world. I don't know that much about my dad. Besides that he loves me. I mean I know that my mom and dad both love me. I don't have that much to say about my dad. I mean he would stop in every once in awhile and he even took me camping. One thing I do remember about my dad is the same thing my mom would do and that would be make and couldn't keep those stupid promises. Those were the things that would really break my heart, is those promises. So many broken and not that many kept.

By now I know you're probably thinking what great parents. But really truly they are. My mom is in jail right now but she promises that she is going to do good this time and actually try to be my mom. I know what you're thinking, how could I believe her, if she has broke so many promises in the past. I can believe her because she is the woman who brought me into this world and I guess that means she is and always will be my mommy and because she is doing so great at trying to get her life back together. That really shows something. She is going through a program at the jail she is at. She always is taking a class to teach her how to make eye glasses and she is passing. She has a 95% in her class. I am really hoping that all of this will make her see that me and my brother need her.

My dad is in right now too. He is going to be in for awhile. But that's ok. I mean sometimes I hate them for leaving me, but I know that I have two wonderful grandparents who would just about do anything they could for me and my brother. So even though my parents aren't the best parents in the world, they're my parents and I love them.

BECKY  
17 YEARS OLD

YOU'RE STILL AROUND

I see you but you are not actually there

I touch your face in my dreams but it's not real

I listen to your voice as I read your letters

But it's only my voice

I can hear you telling your silly jokes

But it's just me telling them just to hear them

Say that you're a funny person

I always hear you talking about your childhood

Stories but it's just me telling everyone you're still around.

# TRAVIS R.

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17 YEARS OLD

I was born in the Modesto Hospital in California on February 19, 1987. My mom was transported from Stanalaus County Jail where she waited to be sent to Chowchilla Penitentiary for a 12-year sentence. My father was already incarcerated at Folsom State Penitentiary at the time of my birth, serving a life sentence for numerous charges. Due to my parent's incarceration, I spent the next 2 years of my life being bumped around from different family members. At the age of two I was put into foster care and was moved around all the time until I was 6 years old. At this time I was placed in a foster home in Placerville California where I stayed until I was 8 years old. In this home I was beaten severely. Despite the abuse my foster dad was the only father figure I had ever known and I became very close to him. He was diagnosed with cancer and died when I was 8 years old. All the emotions built up at that time and I exploded. I felt a lot of hate, I didn't want to be loved, I just wanted to run away. I told my foster mom that she was horrible and I didn't want to live there anymore. I was taken out of her home and placed back with my grandma. I thought I needed to be with my family because I thought they were the right thing for me. I was wrong. I started following in my uncles and cousins footsteps and thought it was cool to be like my dad too. I wanted to do the things my dad did. All of my family is gang affiliated, and now so was I. At the age of

9 I started drinking to keep my feelings from overcoming me. Everyone I was around was older than me. I never really got to be a kid, I grew up too fast. I'm now 17 years old trying to get my life straight, I have a daughter who is 3 and ½ weeks old. I don't want to make the same mistakes my parents did. For the first time I am in a program that I want to successfully graduate from. I have spent 75 months total out of the last 8 years of my life in institutions and correctional programs.

I think back and remember kids walking with their parents and having a good time, I never had that. I have always dreamed of having a mom and a dad and going on family picnics. Maybe just a parent there when I needed a hug. Someone there just to guide me through life, help me to not make the same mistakes they did. I didn't have that, but I could have.

For people who are reading this and have realized you have made some mistakes in your life, it's never too late to go back and fix them. Don't let those mistakes get in the way of you being there for your kids now and in the future. That's what happened to me. My father could have been there for me. He could have told me to do right and supported me over the phone even though he couldn't be there physically. Instead he denied that I was his child and treated me like a piece of shit. My mom, after serving 9 years of a 12 year sentence, had an opportunity to be there for me, but chose the same old life over me. Learn from your mistakes, unlike my parents. Put your kids above everything else from now on. They need you in life, even though and especially because you're not perfect and you have a lot to offer whether your inside or out.

# TANIESHA

18 YEARS OLD

The year 1997 is a year I will never forget. I remember I was in the 5th grade, two weeks before my graduation, my mother went to jail. I was in my room asleep and I felt a kiss on my cheek, and I heard my mom tell me she loves me. The next morning I woke up and my uncle told me that my mom was in jail. I felt so hurt inside because I didn't understand what had just happened. It was something I just couldn't understand, because my mom was such a sweet person to people so, how could she end up in jail. As I got older, my friends started to ask me; why doesn't your mom ever come to any of the functions? I would tell them that she was in California or on a business trip because I felt ashamed. I always thought to myself, "if I told them, they would make fun of me."

The first couple of years I didn't get to see my mom very much. We didn't have anybody to drive me or my sister to Salem Oregon to see her. It was hard for me growing up without my mom. I felt so alone, I didn't have anyone to talk to about what was going on in my life. Sometimes I just wanted my mom to be there so she could take care of me when I was sick, be there when I am sad, and even have a mother and daughter fight. When I got to high school I couldn't ever focus on my work, because I felt like I couldn't deal with the fact that my mom was in jail. Around my sophomore year, I wanted to drop out of school and have a baby by any boy who would give me one.

But, I had to realize that I couldn't make the same mistakes my mom and my sister did.

Finally, my mom moved to Wilsonville and signed me up for the girl scouts program. Even though I was older than most of the girls, it didn't matter to me because I got to spend time with my mom. I started the girl scouts program when I was a junior in high school. I was 17 years old at the time. Being in that program helped me to have a stronger bond with my mom. We talk about a lot of things. I also tell her how my life is out here. Hearing my mother's voice and seeing her face makes my life so much easier. Seeing my mother twice a month makes it so easy. I graduated from Benson High school in 2004 and I have a job and my own apartment now. If it wasn't for the Girl Scout program I wouldn't have seen my mom for a very long time. But, I am thankful that they have this program so that all young girls can see their mom and have a really close relationship with them. I also think that my mom is very happy that she gets to see me because I am her youngest daughter and she wants me to be something in life. She always told me to never follow in her footsteps. My mother is proud of me and I am proud of myself. I thank God that he blessed me with such a wonderful, strong mother even though she made mistakes. She learned her lesson and when she gets out in 15 months she plans on changing her whole life around. I can't wait until that day comes. Living without a mother is hard, but if you put your minds together like we did you will get through it. God Bless.

# MIKE

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17 YEARS OLD

Seeing your dad all over the internet is really unnerving. I was online one day and I saw my dad's name, so I clicked it. My dad's face popped up and I saw him wearing shackles and an orange jump suit that said "Oregon Department of Corrections." I almost cried in the middle of the library full of people. The fact was that I did not want to believe it. I always wonder if I am going to end up like him, locked up and displayed like a bear at the zoo. For me, it really sucks having the knowledge that any one could see my dad in jail, or even having that as public knowledge to every one. I am currently on parole, just like my dad, but I am going to break the cycle.

# CHAD

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## 17 YEARS OLD

As I grow older, I reflect back on what it was like as a child and the things I remember aren't necessarily the best. I remember a past full of drugs, alcohol and poverty. My parents were never married; they just got high and ended up pregnant. I don't know how my other brothers were conceived, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was the same way. My mom walked out on us when I was six weeks old and left my dad with 3 kids, an apartment and a broken heart. He didn't want us to have a bad life so he cleaned up his act, got a job and tried doing things the right way. My mom kept going in and out of our lives. I remember me and my brother stayed at her house one time and she got so high she ended up passing out for 3 days and left me and my brother alone with no food. I was 3, maybe 4 and my brother was 5 or 6. My dad had a fiancé soon after that and they got married. Everything was going good until my step mom got abusive then she and my dad started to drink a lot. My dad would get so drunk that he wouldn't come home sometimes. As we all know alcohol leads to drugs and that's what caused my dad and step mom to divorce. I was in 5th grade when this happened. I came downstairs one night for a drink of water and something hit the top of my head, I got so scared so I yelled for my dad but he wasn't coming so I rushed over to the light and turned it on and when I did it was the most horrible thing, my dad was hanging from the rafters. He didn't die that night. The

cops came and took him the hospital. In 6th grade my mom was moving to California to get away from a small town and all the drugs. About four months after she moved to California she was locked up for drug trafficking 5 kilo's of meth across the border of Mexico. She got locked up for 6 years. I thank god every day that she got caught in the United States instead of Mexico. I would get a letter once or twice a month from her but I would never write back. I followed in her footsteps. I was fighting, stealing and using drugs, just like my mom. I was in and out of institutions the whole time she was locked up. I wanted something that would bring me closer to my mom, so I tried to be like her. 6 years later I'm almost 18 and I'm in a program trying to straighten my life out and my mother is doing the same. We talk and see each other every once in awhile. There is always those awkward moments when none of us know what to say, but we struggle through those moments because we know the feelings we have now that we're together again. It's the best feeling I've ever had now that we're both getting our lives together. I can honestly say I will never lose her again.

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*Western Prison Project*



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The Western Prison Project exists to coordinate a progressive response to the criminal justice system and to build a grassroots, multi-racial movement that achieves criminal justice reform, and reduces the over-reliance on incarceration in the western states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming and Nevada. Our core constituencies are those most impacted by the criminal justice system: people convicted of crimes, survivors of crime and violence, and the families of both.