

HONORING, UNITING, AND CELEBRATING FAMILIES

INSIDE A PRISON

A Youth's Story

Every time I walk into a prison, I feel happy. I do not think I should feel happy, but I am. Do I feel sad or mad? No, that comes later, when I have to leave. The first time I remember my daddy being in jail was when I was in foster care before I was 2 years old. My first actual visit to a jail was when I was about 5 years old. Since then, I have been to a minimum security prison about 15 times, our county jail about 30 times, and the medium security State prison my father is in now about 12 times. I do not want anyone to assume that I am like my father, but I still love him, and I have gone to visit him in jails and prisons to make him happy.



Nobody at school understands the difference between a jail and a prison, but I do. A jail is temporary and visiting is done using a phone with an inmate behind a plexiglass window, so there is less security. In a prison, a visitor is allowed to sit face to face with the inmate, but there are multiple guards standing around, and the visitor must go through a metal detector before entering the gates.

When we visit, a guard puts a stamp on my hand that is invisible except under a black light. This stamp would let the guards know if an inmate was trying to escape with the visitors as they were leaving. Next, we are guided by another guard through the gates. When I walk into the visiting room, I immediately look for my dad. He is never there first, but I do it anyway.

When my dad walks in, we all smile at each other. He sits down and we all start talking. We begin discussing his life in prison so far. He complains and tells us about how his job is going, cleaning trash off the roads or painting the chapel. He tells us about riding in a bus for half of the day to get to the place they will clean trash, even though it is not that far away, and how the backs of the seats on the bus have been ripped off so the inmates have to sit on the bus floor or benches. I talk about school. My brother talks about football. My dad tells us how he survives in the prison.

Prison gives my dad a lot of time to learn. Prison can help people become street smart and book smart. Last time he was in prison, he used to make us art. My dad made us a house of rolled up newspaper, and the fireplace lit up. He once drew me a Scooby Doo card. Now he cannot do art, probably because the prison guards might think someone would stab somebody

else with a crayon. My dad also reads a lot in there, and he read *The Hunger Games* trilogy along with me. This made me happy because we were doing something together, even though we were not with each other while we read the novels.

As I leave, I get sad that I will not see my dad for another few weeks. The view in the parking lot is of orange cones, other people laughing or crying as they walk away to their cars, the blue buses my daddy rides in to work, the gray Smoky Mountains in the orange sunset, and behind us, the ugly brick prison and coils of razor-sharp barbed wire. I wish that my daddy were not in prison, but he is, and there is nothing I can do about it but cry and visit him again.

To learn more information and resources for children of incarcerated parents, visit [Youth.gov](https://www.youth.gov).



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