Today Was a Good Day
A Letter from Lawrence

I'm back! I hope all of you are ready for another issue of News Inside. I'm excited about this one because I recently completed the Sulzberger Executive Leadership Program, a journalism fellowship that helped me zero in on who our readers are. I reached out to many of you across the country to learn what motivates you. Most care about three things above all: freedom, family and faith. In this issue, you will read pieces that touch on all three.

In the interest of freedom, the first article I want to point out is "Who's Electing Judges in the Cleveland Area? Not Those Ensnared in the System." You'll learn that many residents aren't voting in judicial elections because of the lack of information and downright mistrust in the system. This begs the questions: Are people in your community voting in judicial elections? If so, who are they voting for?

I bet many of you will get a kick out of the semi-origin story of the Innocence Project. In "Eric Lander Helped Free the Innocent With DNA. Now Biden Wants Him in the Cabinet," you'll learn the little-known story of one of the organization's early scientific influencers. One caveat about this article, which first ran in January 2021: White House investigation revealed the advisor had bullied some of his employees. Although, Lander is no longer the director of the White House's Office of Science and Technology, I believe there are a lot of useful factoids that make our article worth reading.

Moving on to family, I know that many of you spend hours thinking about getting that release date. You dream about returning to your loved ones, concocting scenarios that are more elaborate than anything on the big screen. For the time being, visits like the one in our photo essay, "Today Was a Good Day," are the closest you come to going home.

I know not everyone gets visits, but most of us want them. I say "us" because I once yearned for them myself. I still remember taking my visit sneakers out of the plastic bag that preserved them and putting on the crispy uniform I would only wear on those special days. I was prison lit, feeling and looking good as I waited for the gallery officer to call my cell number over the loudspeaker. On the other end were my wife and children, dressed prison-visit appropriate after taking the long trip from southern New York to one of the nine northern state prisons I lived in during my 27 years behind the wall.

Also about family is the essay by Demetrius A. Buckley. "Daddy, if I Come See You, Will I Have to Be Locked up, Too?" When reading it, I hope you'll be able to feel the tense insecurity of the father-daughter relationship that can only be won over by love. This brings us to faith, which can be a powerful tool in keeping your spirits up. It doesn't matter which religion you practice, if you are spiritual but aren't part of a particular faith or you simply believe that good will eventually come your way. Having some form of faith can be soothing.

That's why we chose to focus on faith in our latest Reader to Reader call-out. We want to give you an opportunity to advise one another on how to exercise your beliefs based on your own experiences.

Other articles in Issue 10 are "The Only Way We Get Out of There Is in a Pine Box," a rather sad piece about elderly people in prison, and "I’m a Pakistani-American Muslim in a Prison 5 Miles From the Twin Towers. Since 9/11, I’ve Been Treated Like the Enemy." It's a reminder that it is no fun being "othered." It doesn't matter which religion you practice, if you are spiritual but aren't part of a particular faith or you simply believe that good will eventually come your way.

Letters to the Director

I just recently learned about your project by reading the issue just brought to my dorm. I love what you are doing (and many of the ladies in my dorm loved the feature recipes). The article that particularly interested me was the one regarding being represented by Kim Kardashian... Be the change you want to see in the world.

Kristen M., Florida

First off, thank you for all of your efforts and informative information that you provide in the News Inside publication. A friend of mine gave me one of your mags and it was awesome! I would love to be able to get any and all future publications. Do I need to pay for it? Sign up for it? How can I do so?... Thank you again for any and all that you do and have done. Most of all, thank you for your voice.

Eric V., Virginia

Several years ago, I was finishing a college program at a facility to southern California, and was given a copy of The Marshall Project’s News Inside (Issue #1). Taking that education newsletter to me with a lower security facility. I and others have become involved in advancing basic adult literacy. With support, we have created a peer-supported literacy program - the Literacy Support Network - as an extension of the Peer Literacy Mentor Program (formal assignment), which benefits dozens of English Language Learners, and partners with ABE I classes.

Alex V., California

First time reader here! I loved the December 2021 issue [#9], I see I’m 8 issues behind... Finally a magazine for the incarcerated by the incarcerated. What a concept! (Smile)... Keep up the great work! I was ecstatic to discover News Inside! Yay!

Hujr W., New Mexico

On the cover:

Tayla and Truly Excourbar exiting a school bus to visit Tayla’s mother, Tamara McCuy, at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

Drawings are courtesy of the children of See Us, Support Us, a nationwide initiative coordinated by the Osborne Association’s NY Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (NYCIP) with guidance from a national planning and youth team.

Lawrence Bartley
Lawrence Bartley is the director of News Inside. He served a 27-years-to-life sentence and was released on parole in May 2018.
Few people in Cuyahoga County wield as much power over as many lives as the 34 elected judges who preside over felony cases. These Common Pleas judges consider the cases of thousands of people a year, making decisions about who receives leniency, bail, plea deals and sentencing.

By RACHEL DISSELL, ILICA MAHAJAN, ANNA FLAGG and WESLEY LOWERY

Cuyahoga County’s voting patterns have resulted in mostly White judges deciding the fate of mostly Black criminal defendants.

In Cleveland, voting patterns have resulted in mostly White judges deciding the fate of mostly Black criminal defendants.

In the past about three miles east of Cleveland’s downtown Justice Center. In the past three years, the people with the most at stake to vote those judges in — or out — of office, the people with the most at stake often don’t cast ballots.

Take Ward 5, a majority Black area and the second-highest proportionate rate. To understand how they sentence, and how strict they are, or how lenient they are, 29% of county voters marked their ballot for president, only to be soundly defeated. "It almost impossible to vote out a judge," said Jerry Prim, who has managed and consulted on judicial campaigns and said there is an unwritten rule among local Democrats that candidate. That often results in less participation in those elections and easy victories for incumbents.

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The disparity in power between county and city voters creates a big problem, because few judges on the ballot understand the experiences of people who appear in court — often people of color living in the city,

said Erika Anthony, who co-founded Cleveland VOTES. "Essentially, our bench is dominated by White, Westside Irish Catholic in individuals," Anthony said, referring to the county’s long tradition of electing judges with Irish and Italian surnames, like Gallagher and Russo.

Ohio, like most states, allows voters to elect its judges. Twice, in 1938 and 1987, attempts to switch back to an appointment system have appeared on the ballot, only to be soundly defeated. But even after fighting to keep the right to elect judges, county voters consistently show up less often for judicial elections. Many judicial races in Cuyahoga County aren’t contested, 20 of the 35 county-level criminal court judicial races since 2016 had a single candidate. That often results in less participation in elections and easy victories for incumbents.

Voters have more power than they think. If everyone who showed up to vote had cast ballots for judges as well, that could have swung the election left the judicial races.

"I would like to know their records of judicial races and the fact they fall every four years, depending on what their age is. Every voting precinct in Cuyahoga County — and largely across the country — sees a drop off in voting in judicial races, especially a sitting judge. "And they know this. They’re keenly aware. They know they have that job for 30 or 40 years, depending on what their age is."

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Who’s Electing Judges in the Cleveland Area? Not Those Ensnared in the System.
Christopher Thorpes, resident and community activist, in Cleveland’s Central neighborhood, in December. AMBER N. FORD FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT.

The precinct had by far the highest share of votes cast in judicial races. Not all areas with substantial numbers of defendants have low rates of voting for judges. There are pockets in Cleveland and the suburbs that are home to more court defendants but also vote for judges at above-average rates. The Clark-Fulton neighborhood is home to St. Rocca, a century-old church built by working-class Italian immigrants, known for producing lawyers and revered judges, like Salvatore Calandra, who sat on the municipal court for a quarter of a century. Today, voters in the precinct where the church stands no longer turn out in force to elect judges. Nearly half of voters in the precinct who cast ballots in last year’s presidential election left the judicial races blank. More than 1 in 20 adults in this precinct appeared before a judge between 2019 and 2020, one of the highest rates in the county. Latino now make up more than half the population in the neighborhood; residents speak Spanish in most of the corner stores. County voters got access to bilingual ballots about a decade ago, but only after the U.S. Justice Department threatened to sue the county’s Board of Elections. Still, many residents are new to participating in elections for city council, mayor and judicial races, said Selina Pagan, director for the Young Latino Network. Many probably “don’t even realize that they have power to shift these dynamics within our court system” by voting for judges, she said. Cleveland’s Latino communities are not a monolith, she said. Puerto Rican residents often voted at much higher levels on the island, but may not feel a part of democracy in Cleveland, she said. Residents from Guatemala, Colombia or Mexico sometimes live in households with family members who are applying for U.S. citizenship or who are undocumented and can’t vote, so that habit isn’t naturally passed on to children. Pagan sees this dynamic in her own family. “I still have to jump through hoops to talk about this stuff with my family because it’s exhausting to them,” she said. “They don’t have any hope in the system.” Few judicial candidates prioritize campaigning in the community, which is mainly in Ward 14, perhaps because of the historically low turnout, Adam Davenport, a neighborhood planner, said. “I’ve been working in the neighborhood for over 10 years, and I’ve had maybe two judges make active efforts to come to block clubs,” he said. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a judge, maybe one, that had any campaign literature in Spanish.” Thorpes said judicial candidates also rarely show up in Cleveland’s Central neighborhood, a majority Black stretch on the near east side of the city, which is thick with low-income housing complexes. He theorized that’s because voter turnout is historically low — less than 5% of registered voters in Central turned out in November’s mayoral election. That lack of engagement means fewer chances for residents to learn about the roles judges play in the system. Or to size up how the sitting judges have treated members of their community.

“If you want my vote, you need to get out. And you know what? Even let the people do a survey on you,” Thorpes said.

Common Pleas Judge William Vodrey, elected in 2020 after his second run, said he tried to campaign “anywhere I thought I might find voters,” whether the most affluent or the poorest neighborhoods in the county. It was easier to do, he said, in places with already active Democratic ward clubs, most of which are in the suburbs. (Vodrey said he does remember attending one information session in Ward 5, which includes Central.) Vodrey said he sent out some campaign mailers in Spanish and Arabic. “I don’t know how many voters that might have reached,” he said. “But I thought it was important to meet people where they were at.” Residents in Central have some of the most pressing reasons to care about which judges are elected. About one in eight residents faced charges before a judge in the past six years, and that experience ripples out into the community, to their families and friends. It’s hard to expect people who are returning from incarceration or who have encountered police or courts to act alone to change the system, said Fred Ward, a founder of the Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Necessary Political Action Committee, which started interviewing and endorsing judicial candidates a little over a year ago. It can be discouraging, he said, when formerly incarcerated residents see judges whom they’ve found to be unfair get political endorsements and major-party backing. “They don’t feel like they have a voice,” he said. Ward said that can be discouraging. Ward’s PAC campaigned against Common Pleas Judge John O’Donnell, who lost both the tickets for the Ohio Supreme Court, based on his record to Cleveland police officer Michael Brelo.
Some experts hope Eric Lander, the president’s choice for new science adviser, will crack down on bad forensics in courtrooms.

By ELI HAGER

Eric Lander, left, who was just nominated to be President Biden’s science adviser, showing Peter Neufeld, right, who went on to co-found the Innocence Project, how to look at DNA in 1998. COURTESY OF COLD SPRING HARBOR LABORATORY

In November 1988, at a secretive conference center in the woods in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, a select group of biologists, judges, philosophers and others gathered for three days to debate what was then a brand-new practice: the use of DNA to help catch criminals.

Also in attendance were two Bronx criminal defense lawyers who knew very little about science. They were there in part because they were working on a murder case in which the prosecutors were planning to present this novel type of evidence—something they had only recently been found on the defendant’s wristwatch, containing bands of DNA.

As the first day of the conference opened, William Scheck, a forensic record of the event show, many of the speakers were expressing great optimism about what was being called “DNA fingerprinting.” They described the much-hyped new science as “obvious” and “infallible.”

But during a coffee break, they pulled Lander aside, asking him if he could take a quick look at the X-ray films of the DNA from their case. “They dragged me into this side room; they locked the door,” Lander recalled years later. “I needed this like a hole in the head.”

Lander reluctantly agreed to help, holding the images up to a window. He was stunned by what he saw: The DNA did not line up at all. Was a court of law really going to allow this “schmutz,” as he called it, to be presented to a jury?

Lander was radicalized in that moment; he says. Not only did he start helping out with the murder case, eventually persuading the prosecutors’ own experts to admit that the DNA sample was flawed. He also kept teaching these two lawyers for years to come, turning them into the nation’s leading experts on how to use science to prove the wrongful conviction in court.

The two lawyers are Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, who went on to found the Innocence Project, the national legal defense organization that has since helped free hundreds of innocent people from prison using DNA.

“Before we met Eric, I would say that Barry’s and my scientific comprehension was somewhere below primate-level,” said Neufeld in an interview with the Marshall Project. “But he taught us to embrace science, and the rest is history.”

More than a half-dozen experts on forensics told the Marshall Project that Biden’s decision to create a Cabinet position for Lander—head of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy—could be an opportunity to establish more rigorous federal standards for using science in the American courtroom. Many are expressing their enthusiasm privately, not wanting law enforcement groups to challenge Lander’s confirmation by the Senate if they catch wind that he is an unsung hero of the innocence movement.

To be sure, Lander, who is better known for his work helping to sequence the human genome, will have plenty of other issues on his plate as Biden’s science adviser—including two enormous ones: the pandemic and climate change. But he could create a standalone position in his new office that is devoted to forensic science, several experts said. They hope he will continue the work that he started as a member of President Obama’s council of science advisers, which published a 2016 report dismissing as “scientifically unsound” certain courtroom practices in which so-called experts hired by prosecutors claim they can match bite marks, shoe prints, handwriting, gun residue and the like to a person accused of a crime.

“Eric’s long-held belief has been that if we’re going to use scientific evidence—with all the persuasive power that the word ‘scientific’ has with juries—well, then, it should be scientific,” said Jennifer L. Mnookin, dean of the UCLA School of Law and an expert on forensics.

Experts also hope that Lander can use the power of the federal government to help organize and fund rigorous studies of newer types of scientific technologies, including criminal justice systems, such as risk-assessment algorithms that claim to objectively calculate a defendant’s threat level to society.

Born in Brooklyn and a mathematician by training, Lander largely taught himself genetics, going on to become a professor of the subject at M.I.T. and Harvard. He also founded and directs the Broad Institute, a genomics research center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But it was not until the conference at the Banbury Center, a science think tank in Cold Spring Harbor, that he became deeply interested in how forensic science seems selfless to me, ” said Jennifer L. Mnookin, dean of the UCLA School of Law and an expert and law professor at the University of California, Irvine. “Not many people even know he does this work.”

Lander more recently drew criticism for leading a 90th-birthday toast to James Watson, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA and a founder of the field of genetics, despite Watson’s history of racism and racist comments.

Lander apologized for the toast a week after giving it. The founders of the Innocence Project and others in forensics say that despite these often bitterly personal controversies within the scientific community, Lander’s passion usually arises from the science itself.

“What he’s been doing in terms of forensic science seems selfless to me,” said William C. Thompson, a forensic expert and law professor at the University of California, Irvine. “Not many people even know he does this work. He just does a good job of translating complex science for non-scientists—much better than Lander at translating complex science for non-scientists—much better than Lander at translating complex science for non-scientists.”

Experts also said there is no one better to lead crime-tackling research and turning it into public policy. When he was on the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology during the Obama administration, 
science.

“He’s one of the best lawyers I’ve ever met who isn’t a lawyer—because of his ability to teach,” said Scheck. “Which is why it was so extraordinarily lucky that we happened to meet him that day in Cold Spring Harbor.”

In February 2022, Eric Lander, President Biden’s top science adviser, resigned following an internal White House investigation that concluded he bullied and demeaned his subordinates.

“The Only Way We Get Out of There Is in a Pine Box’

Elderly, ailing and expensive, lifetime prisoners cost Louisiana taxpayers millions a year.

By JOHN SIMERMAN

Illustration by JUAN BERNABEU for The Marshall Project

Baton Rouge, La. — Lester Pearson hoisted himself out of a chair and poked through his wallet with creased hands, fishing out a medical card showing that he’d been locked up for a little over two decades into a life sentence for murder, which in Louisiana means death in prison.

Now 84, Pearson wears bifocals with watching over geriatric prisoners like Pearson, who was among the oldest and longest-serving lifers in the state until he was released in October under a deal with Orleans Parish District Attorney Jason Williams.

Recent legislative reforms aimed at lowering the United State’s leading incarceration rate had reduced the state’s penalties for drug and other nonviolent crimes. But they largely kept in place stiff sentences for people convicted of murder and other violent crimes, after prosecutors and sheriffs balked.

The result is a state prison population that has rapidly aged, contributing to an even higher proportion of elderly prisoners, as incarceration levels fall steeply.

“Much of that money is spent to care for geriatric people, who some experts say pose little risk of committing new crimes,” said Edward Shihadeh, a Louisiana State University sociology professor who now heads Mississippi’s corrections department, and others have described a tendency for prisoners to retreat into their eyes, “Shihadeh said.

One outcome: In 2015, the typical incarcerated person in Louisiana was just over 36 years old. Today, the typical prisoner is nearly 41, according to a recent state budget document.

“Those in prison for life pull up the curve. The typical Louisiana lifer today is a 52-year-old Black man who has been kept up for a little over two decades, an analysis of state corrections data shows. Over 60% of Louisiana lifers are men over the age of 40,” said Shihadeh.

We just got rid of the cheaper ones,” said Edward Shihadeh, a Louisiana State University sociology professor who now heads Mississippi’s corrections department, and others have described a tendency for prisoners to retreat to a steady rise in prison medical costs, even as incarceration levels fall steeply.

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The state population of incarcerated people peaked above 40,000 a decade ago, and remained just under 36,000 when the 2017 reforms passed. State figures from this year show the population at about 27,800.

These reductions, primarily affecting younger defendants facing shorter prison terms, helped Louisiana drop a little worse. ”

and grips a prison-issued cane to get around.

“I ain’t healthy,” he said. “I don’t feel bad, but since I got my pacemaker, that’s when I kind of started losing balance. “As the years go,” he added, “it gets a little worse.”

Louisiana is increasingly charged with watching over geriatric prisoners like Pearson, who was among the oldest and longest-serving lifers in the state until he was released in October under a deal with Orleans Parish District Attorney Jason Williams.

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“It’s not just a U.S. thing,” he said of prison life.

“You look at all of these variables of offending, and age is by far the most powerful predictor and always has been, and interestingly, is for all places,” said Marcus Kondak, a sociology professor at Loyola University in New Orleans. “It’s not just a U.S. thing.”

State corrections officials say the number of Louisiana prisoners 60 or older has risen by half since 2013, to about 2,590.

But Cain, the former Angola warden who now heads Mississippi’s corrections department, and others have described a tendency for prisoners to retreat to a steady rise in prison medical costs, even as incarceration levels fall steeply.

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I’m a Pakistani-American Muslim in a Prison 5 Miles From The Twin Towers. Since 9/11, I’ve Been Treated Like the Enemy

09.03.2021

It doesn’t matter how American I feel. The labels applied to me are “foreign,” “terrorist,” “inmate” and “other.”

by TARIQ MAQBOOL

Tariq Maqbool is serving a life sentence at the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, New Jersey. He is a contributing writer at the Prison Journalism Project, and you can read more of his thoughts on his blog, Captive Voices.

Illustration by SANA NASIR FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

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Illustration by SANA NASIR FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT
“Daddy, if I Come See You, Will I Have to Be Locked up, Too?”

Recently reunited with his 10-year-old daughter, Demetrius Buckley struggles to push past the barriers of a maximum security prison to be present for his curious, whip-smart little girl.

By DEMETRIUS BUCKLEY

Demetrius A. Buckley is a poet and fiction writer. His work has been published in The Michigan Quarterly Review, RHINO, The Periphery and Storyteller. He’s currently working on a novel, “HalfBred.” He’s serving a 20-year sentence for second-degree murder at Baraga Correctional Facility in Michigan.

Illustration by DOLA SUN FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

Ever since I reconected with my 10-year-old daughter in January, I’ve been tussling with hard questions about being a father. I wonder if it’s possible to be a reliable parent behind the wall of a Level 5 maximum security facility.

Staying in contact is one of the biggest challenges. At Baraga Correctional Facility in Michigan — where I am serving 20 years — 40 men have one hour to use six phones. At any time, six phones can become four because two of them are often broken. Each conversation has a 15-minute limit that begins as soon as someone accepts the call.

The JPay email kiosk system is equally frustrating. To get access, 40 of us have to leave our cells one at a time, go to a small room and plug up our small tablets. We download and send messages — unless the JPay is broken that day.

I don’t fully know why I fell out of touch with my daughter’s mother — and my daughter — for six years. I called their number one day, and it was out of service. I started writing to them twice a month but got no response. So I limited my letters to holidays and birthdays, but still didn’t hear back. Eventually, I learned through a friend that my daughter’s mother had had more children. Maybe she was too busy to maintain a connection with me, too busy living her best life.

When I heard my daughter’s grandparents were moving away from the last address I had that was connected to her, I knew I had to do everything in my power to make contact. Somehow, their presence had made me believe that if I was quiet enough for long enough, my daughter would ask them about me. But she didn’t, and their move prompted me to get her mother’s number from a friend.

of Saif-ul-Malak, making it hard to tell where the sky ends and the earth begins. And then there are the deserts where explorers and conquerors once trekked on the hallowed ruins of Mohenjo-daro. The city of Lahore, though, is, particu-
larly special to me. I can see myself running through the bazaars and stopping to taste the freshly squeezed, lime-
green sugarcane juice that made the hot days more bearable. That’s the Pakistani part of me that I carry in my DNA.

But I had also been coming to America since I was a young child to visit extended family members who had settled here in the 1970s and 1980s. With each visit, I absorbed the culture and the language. When I eventually moved to New York City as a young teen, I didn’t ever have an accent to separate me from my peers. I threw myself into the typical American high school experience. That meant football, tailgate parties and cheerleaders. It also meant Nathan’s hot dogs on Coney Island, pastrami sandwiches at Katz’s deli, New York-style pizza and fresh-out-of-the-oven apple pie.

Enjoying all of these standard American treats while also stopping into my favorite Pakistani restaurants to get my fill of nihari and firni spoke to the duality of my American identity. I was equally comfortable in the flea markets of Queens and in the bazaars of Lahore.

Spending most of my formative years in New York City, the Mecca of diversity, I was that of a multinational, multilingual and multicultural human being. I went to college, worked in corporate America and even owned a cell phone business at the age of 25. I belonged here in America. To paraphrase President Obama, nowhere else is my story possible.

But in the end, what I felt and how the world saw me became two completely different realities.

Once I got the number, it took me a couple days to secure a phone. I had butterflies in my stomach; their wings beat against the biscuits and gravy I had eaten for breakfast. As I dialed, I wondered if my daughter would curse at me or if she would talk to me at all.

"Hey," her mother answered.

"Long time," I said, laughing at her bluntness. "Is she listening to our conversation?"

"Yeah," I asked, trying to get back on her good side. "You hold your ground."

"I'm doing OK," I replied in a firmer tone. I got the "young lady" part from TV.

"I'm sorry, Daddy..." she said and trailed off.

When I heard this, I felt defeated. My baby girl was apologizing for voicing her opinion.

"Don't ever back down," I said, trying to get back on her good side. "You have your ground."

She changed the subject. "Daddy, can I get a puppy?"

"OK," I said, already trying to fix things with gifts. Now I have to convince her mother to buy her a puppy when they already have two dogs.


Eventually, she asked again when she could see me. "Soon, when I get closer to Detroit," I told her. I was supposed to have been transferred to a lower-level facility in that area months ago, but transfers paused because of COVID.

"Daddy, I can't see you because of your poor choices," she snapped at me.

"Yeah, you're right. And this is why you need to do your best in school.

"Suddenly, she was full of questions: "Do you get lonely, Daddy? Do you have friends in there? Can you go outside? If I come see you, will I have to be locked up, too?"

I found a way to change the subject until her mother got her off the phone.

Answers to her questions rumbled in my core. By 12 a.m. count, I was sweating a lake. The truth is that I don't have friends to claim in prison; most guys end up fighting or stabbing each other. Outside is just a small box, fences, barbed wires and more fences. And if she visits, she will be in kind of a lockup for that hour. She will be patted down. I have to explain what that means, and she will have to decide if she is comfortable going through that process to see her father for the first time.

In April, I missed a week of talking to my daughter due to COVID shutdowns. Then the facility allowed us to Skype or Zoom in place of visits. One day, when my daughter didn't have her home-school classes, her mother woke her up and gave her the phone.

"Hey daddy," she said, groggily. "Guess what?"

"Chicken butt," I said loudly.

She laughed and came back with, "Guess what? Chicken feet."

We did this for so long we ran out of chicken jokes. "OK, for real, I will be able to Skype with you very soon," I told her. "We can see each other. Momma says you're tall now."

Before I could go further, the voice messaging system said we had one minute left.

"Who is that White lady, daddy? Why is she on the phone?"

I ticked off.

"That's not nice, young lady," I replied in a firmer tone. I got the "young lady" part from TV.

"I'm sorry, Daddy..." she says and trailed off.

When I heard this, I felt defeated. My baby girl was apologizing for voicing her opinion.

"Don't ever back down," I said, trying to get back on her good side.

"You have your ground."

I told her, "We can see each other. Momma says you're tall now."

By CELINA FANG

Photographs by CASSANDRA GIRALDO for The Marshall Project
At 5 a.m. on a Saturday, Tayla Escobar, 22, woke up her 4-year-old daughter, Truly, to head bleary-eyed to a yellow school bus near Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn. They were going upstate to visit Tayla’s mother, Tammara McCoy, 43, at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

The trip was organized by Hour Children, a nonprofit organization focused on helping incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and their families. In the dark and the rain, Tayla and Truly boarded the bus. By the time they arrived at the maximum-security women’s prison, every seat on the bus was taken.

Tayla was 10 years old when her mother was first imprisoned at Albany County Jail in 2007. Her brothers, Timeek McCoy and Tasir Brown, were 9 and 7. In 2009, Tammara was convicted of second-degree murder and conspiracy in the death of Tyrone McCoy, her estranged husband.

She was given a sentence of 25 years to life, maintains her innocence and lost her appeal in 2011. Tayla remembers what it felt like to be separated from her mother at such a young age. “It was traumatic, especially when you hear the amount of time,” she said. “I was a child. So it felt like the end of the world.”

The three siblings went to live with Tammara’s mother, but she died in 2011. The children were split up—Tayla moved between friends’ homes, while Timeek and Tasir went to live with relatives.

Over the years, Tammara’s incarceration has made Tasir more guarded. “I don’t really try to interact with people or let people in,” he said. “I don’t want anybody else to leave out of my life.”

Parenting from prison has its challenges, but Tammara’s children have found ways to adjust to their mother’s absence while keeping her close. Their holiday visit was particularly special this year. It was the first time that Timeek, Tammara’s oldest son, had seen his mother in three years.
Tayla visits her mother with Truly about once a month. “It’s always exciting to see her,” said Tayla. “We have our own problems out in the real world. When you go in there, you leave all of that behind.”

Bedford Hills currently houses 690 women.

Truly sat on her grandmother’s lap in the gymnasium of the prison. “Every time I get to see them is special,” said Tammara. “Every time I don’t see them, it’s the hardest.”

Tasir, 19, held onto his mother as they watched Truly competing in a dance contest.

Tayla signed in at the facility’s family center. Along with their time in the security line, Tayla and Truly waited about 30 minutes to get in. Visitors are not allowed to bring in cell phones, smartwatches, laptops and other equipment with wi-fi capability.

Tables were decorated and lunch was served at the holiday event. Donors provided gifts picked by the parents for their children.
Tammara’s family stayed close to each other throughout the four-and-a-half hour visit.

Tammara said goodbye to her oldest son, Timeek, whom she hadn’t seen in three years.

Mother and daughter have a moment after leaving the building. “Now that I’m an adult, it’s hard to visit my mom because I work. I go to school. I’m a single mom,” said Tayla. “But everything that my mom has done in this prison is to make sure that she keeps in contact. She stretches out her arms to make sure that she can keep that family bond.”

A bundled-up Truly sat on the bus for the return trip. It was dark again. “This is probably the hardest time, the holidays,” said Tayla. “Once you come out, you have to worry about the real world all over again.”
Being an incarcerated parent is one of the most difficult things you can go through in life. Take it from someone whose daughter was born seven days after my arrest and who conceived two sons during his 27-year sentence. I also know it can be hard to discuss such an emotional subject. That’s why we created “Reader to Reader,” to make a space for people who have found a way to do what sometimes seems impossible to share their methods with those who need it the most.

Last issue we invited incarcerated readers from across the country to share stories and tips on how they stay connected with the children in their lives. The 3,000 responses we received were heartbreaking, uplifting and insightful at the same time.

For those who gave, I hope you’ve found a new level of self-worth. And for those who received, I hope you’ve gained new ways of connecting with the children you love. As one reader from Pennsylvania put it, “Love from a distance is still love.”
All images courtesy of the children of See Us, Support Us, a nationwide initiative coordinated by the Osborne Association’s NY Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (NYCIP) with guidance from a national planning and youth team. SUSU raises awareness about and increases support for children of incarcerated parents. Find out more at www.susu-osborne.org.

I don’t have kids, I have been locked up for more than 14 years and I stay in contact with my nieces and nephews. I feel like no one really cares about inmates staying in touch with family. We can stay connected despite poor leadership and corruption.

I really just love my 3 daughters and I really do think about them a lot. I write to them quite a bit. I also write to many women in Pennsylvania. I hope they will be in a better place than I am.

Parents behind walls must understand that people and their children included, have lives outside these walls. So learn patience, try to meditate and come up with the best solution. That’s how you deal with difficult times. I also ask them to stay relentless and active in their child’s life regardless of your circumstances.

Dad's letter to his daughter:

I write to you all the time. I love you all.

I don’t have kids, but I have been writing letters that last a year or two. I am going to start writing poems to them. I write to all of my nieces and nephews. I am going to write poems to them.

My mom was locked up in 1977, I am not sure if she is still alive. I don’t know if she is still alive.

We are all locked up for doing nothing. It’s like they want us to keep quiet and that is not fair. I don’t want to keep quiet. I want to keep writing to them.

Parents need support and I believe government needs to do more to support them.

I have been locked up for over 14 years. I have been writing letters to my nieces and nephews. I have been writing letters to my daughter. I have been writing letters to my mother.

I don’t have kids. I have nieces and nephews. I want to keep writing to them. I want to keep writing to my daughter. I want to keep writing to my mother.

I don’t have kids. I have nieces and nephews. I want to keep writing to them. I want to keep writing to my daughter. I want to keep writing to my mother.
Religion can be a source of guidance and strength, but finding ways to practice your spirituality can at times be different behind bars.

No matter what form of religion or spirituality you practice, share how you stay connected to your faith while incarcerated.

Tell us about a holy day that you had to celebrate behind bars. What did you do to connect with your spirituality? What were the challenges, and how did you overcome them? What tips do you have for other members of your faith who are incarcerated? (For example, how do you pray and fast during Ramadan, or observe Lent? How do you adhere to religious dietary restrictions?)

Our next Reader to Reader is about...
The Marshall Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization that seeks to create and sustain a sense of national urgency about the U.S. criminal justice system. We achieve this through award-winning journalism, partnerships with other news outlets and public forums. In all of our work we strive to educate and enlarge the audience of people who care about the state of criminal justice.

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