



Get on the Bus gives new meaning to Father's Day

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Tyrone Powell III leaned against the back wall of the visiting room at California Men's Colony, a prison in San Luis Obispo, on June 12 and looked anxiously at the door. Soon, his father Tyrone Powell II, who is serving a life sentence in the prison, would come through that door, and the pair would be reunited for the first time in four years.

The 16-year-old Oakland native had started his journey before 5 a.m. and had waited more than five hours to see his dad. He was so nervous that his leg had gone numb.

But even after the long separation, the two recognized each other immediately and embraced.

"Yeah, when I turned around, I was looking around, looking for him. And then when I turned around and I seen him, I was like, 'There he go,' " the father said. "I was like, 'Whoa.' My heart just started pounding. It's been a long time."

The Powells don't get to see each other very often. Not only are they separated by the bars and barbed wire that surround the prison, they also live nearly 200 miles away from each other. Their meeting June 12 was made possible by Get on the Bus, an organization that reunites incarcerated moms and dads with their children once a year near Mother's

Day and Father's Day.

Sister Suzanne Jabro is a co-founder of Get on the Bus. The member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph Catholic community hopes that reunifying families, even for just one day, can bridge the gap that's created when a parent is

incarcerated.

California has more than 150,000 men and women behind bars, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

More than half of those inmates will never see a visitor during the entire time behind bars. That isolation can take a toll on an inmate, most of whom are likely to one day rejoin society outside of prison walls.

According to one Florida study, inmates who had visitors were 30 percent less likely to reoffend within a year after being released. Get on the Bus wants to conduct studies of its own in California to see if its program has a similar effect on the inmates it serves.

Lt. Dean Spears, a spokesman for California Men's Colony, said he sees a difference in inmates' behavior when they're expecting a visit like the one they received recently.

"They want to stay out of trouble," Spears said. "A lot of times we'll find that problems with a certain group of inmates are reduced over a period of time when they're anticipating this type of program happening for them."

Jabro said that the visits are also beneficial for the children, a lot of whom are looking for signs of

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themselves in their parents' eyes. More than that, Jabro said, many of these children have lived with the shame of having an incarcerated parent, and these trips can mean meeting other children in their situation for the first time.

The Corrections Department estimates the number of children with a parent in prison at 200,000.

Professor Robert Ayasse, of UC Berkeley's School of Social Welfare, said that while he thinks it's almost always beneficial for a child to know his or her father, he does have some reservations about how much one visit can actually do for these fractured families.

"I think that if it's going to be of long-term benefit to both the dad and the child, then there needs to be some ongoing follow-up," Ayasse said.

During the Get on the Bus visit, Tyrone Barker Jr., 23, sat on a bench on a visiting room patio and talked to his 18-month-old son. You'd never be able to tell by looking at them, but this was the first time Barker had seen the child.

Barker has been locked up for four years, serving time for drug possession. Meanwhile, his wife, Cherie, 21, of San Bruno, has been taking care of the couple's two children — their son and 4-year-old daughter.

Barker said that focusing on his family is what gets him through his prison term.

"Everyday, without them, this would be horrible," Barker said. "So, by having my family by my side, it let's me know that I have somebody out there that still loves me."

Barker said he can't wait to rejoin his family permanently when he's release later this year.

And several hours later, back in Berkeley, Tyrone Powell III, who had also been reunited with his father, didn't seem nervous anymore.

"I thought I was going to be quiet or not excited, but I ended up being excited," he said. "It was good. I was actually smiling. And I don't smile."

Amanda Dyer is a reporter for News21, a Carnegie-Knight-funded initiative on the future of journalism. For more information on the program, go to news21.com.

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