



Program helps inmates get holiday visits from family

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For most sons and daughters, Father's Day is a time to spend with dad sharing in his favorite activity or maybe cooking his favorite meal. But for the fathers who make up part of the 5,150 male inmates at California State Prison, Solano, located in Vacaville, Father's Day is a challenge.

Most of the incarcerated fathers at the institution are serving time hundreds of miles away from their families. Some have children they have never even seen since being locked up and many families don't have the resources to make a visit to the prison at all.

Fortunately, the nonprofit Center for Restorative Justice Works has a program called Get On The Bus that unites children, families and communities separated by crime and the criminal justice system. There is no cost to the families and the primary sponsors are the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the Center for Restorative Justice Works.

On Saturday morning, a white tour bus with nearly 30 children and their adult chaperones from the Los Angeles area pulled into medium security CSP, Solano. The children boarded the bus at 11 p.m. the night before and drove through the night. A local

church, The Mission, fed them breakfast before making the short trip over to the prison, where they waited in the visitors center with groggy eyes to be processed for entry.

On that bus was 12-year-old Jermaine Combs Jr. He hadn't seen his father, Jermaine Combs Sr., in more than a year.

Sitting in the large

visiting room with about a dozen others, Jermaine was full of nervous excitement as the prisoners began to filter in.

Combs, dressed in prison-issue blue denim, cracked a huge smile as soon as he saw his son.

"I miss you, man. I love you," said Combs to his son after a long embrace.

The two chatted at a small table for a while where Combs asked his son about school, how his mother was and sports.

"It's a good feeling. I've been waiting for this for a long time," Combs said. "It's just good to see him. He's got all these pimples and stuff, going through puberty. He's becoming a man."

Combs said he was especially thankful for the Get On The Bus program. Without it, Jermaine would not have made the trip. As it was, Jermaine had to endure a series of bus and train transfers just to get to the chartered bus for the prison trip.

Nearby was Anthony Virgil, another CSP, Solano inmate who was visiting with his two boys and their mother. The last time he saw his sons Trent, 18, and Trevor, 16, was in February 2009.

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"This means everything to me. I'm really grateful," said Virgil, whose family has a hard time making the visit from Orange County. "I can't put it into words how special it is to have them here."

"I'm just glad to be here because we don't really get to see him. So whenever we do it is a good day," Trent said.

For many of the incarcerated fathers, it was a Father's Day dream come true, complete with tears of joy.

The program is funded mostly through individual donations but receives heavy support from churches as well as schools, foundations, grants and other organizations.

Sister Suzanne Jabro of Los Angeles was an organizer for the first Get On The Bus event. Into its 11th year, Jabro says they will bring hundreds of children to seven prisons this year with a total of 60 buses chartered. All visits are centered around Mother's Day and Father's Day.

Sitting in the visitors center on the A-side of the prison, Jabro recounts the story of one child who visited their mother and father in separate institutions and others whose only link to their parent has been a photograph.

"The family bond is really critical," Jabro said. "These relationships will have to be strengthened and mended."

Officials say that by maintaining ties with their children, incarcerated fathers are less inclined to return to crime.

This was the first time that the Get On The Bus program visited CSP, Solano. Jabro and prison officials plan to do it bigger and better next year.

Jabro can't help but smile when she looks around the room and sees children reconnecting with their incarcerated parent.

"There's no way to measure the amount of healing that is going on here," Jabro said.

For more information about Get On The Bus or to volunteer, visit www.getonthebus.us.

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