



June 23, 2010

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Friday, June 18, 2010

## Getting on the bus for Father's Day Kids and their caretakers bring hope to their imprisoned dads at the California Men's Colony.

By R. W. Dellinger

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Four a.m. June 5, and not much was stirring in Beverly Hills - except at Good Shepherd Church. It wasn't an early Mass, but a special once-a-year breakfast in the parish hall.

"Good morning! Good morning!" said a white-haired woman. "Come on in."



A half-dozen volunteers were checking in children and teenagers from South Los Angeles along with their guardians and caregivers. On a row of tables with name cards was spread out age-specific "goodie" bags with coloring books, puzzles, mini-soccer balls and even instamatic cameras.

The parish workers took time to make sure everybody had the necessary documents, including birth certificates, photo IDs and notarized papers, before handing out purple T-shirts with "Get On The Bus" across the front.

Because these early rising boys and girls weren't going on a parish picnic or church outing. They would soon be on their way to visit their incarcerated dads at the California Men's Colony outside of San Luis Obispo as an early Father's Day celebration.

But first it was time for a hearty breakfast of bacon and scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, burritos, French toast, melons, strawberries and juices served by other volunteers like Margaret Kame. This was the third year the personal injury attorney has gotten up in the middle of the night to help out at the annual event.

"I think if we had more things like this instead of just locking people up and forgetting about them, we'd have a lot less crime," she observed. "Prison is not supposed to be about punishment more than it is about rehabilitation. And that's the problem. Also, when someone is convicted, you're convicting the whole family - you're not just convicting the person. And that's another problem, to have your family so far away they can't visit you."

Not far away was another lawyer and Good Shepherd parishioner. John Doherty and his wife, actor Michael Learned who starred as Olivia Walton in the long-running TV series "The Waltons," signed up as volunteers this year after hearing about Get On The Bus at church. He helped a family complete all the intricate paper work hurdles that California prisons require of visitors.

"It seemed like such a great thing," he said. "There's so many of these children who haven't seen their fathers in years. I just think dads are part of the family no matter what. The kids have got to have some contact because some day their dad will get out and he's got to have a relationship with his child."

Learned was holding a clear plastic sandwich bag with quarters and dollar bills for the 14-year-old she was accompanying to CMC. He



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would be allowed to give the pocket money he saved to his dad.

"Trevan lives with his aunt, who has her own child, in Inglewood," she explained. "These families have gotten up at God knows what hour and driven here so these children could see their loved ones. You forget sometimes when people are in prison that they have people who love them. And I think that's probably very important for prisoners' rehabilitation as well to know that there are people on the outside who still care for them."

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**'June gloom' journey**

The four-hour ride in the three charter buses from Beverly Hills to beyond San Luis Obispo began with a prayer and blessing for the 130 kids and their guardians and chaperons. The visitors, wearing the purple Get On The Bus T-shirts now, mostly dozed until the darkness gave way to a June Gloom haze over the 405 Freeway and then partly sunny skies once the caravan was on the 101 outside of Santa Barbara. Kids and their families snacked on mini-Snickers, crackers and potato chips.



At 8:45, the buses arrived at the California Men's Colony, where they were warmly welcomed by Get On The Bus regional coordinator Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet Theresa Harpin and her volunteers from central California. A few families got off at the West minimum security facility of tan dorm-like buildings. But most went on to the East facility, a medium security institution surrounded by a high razor-wire fence housing 3,720 inmates, including 1,600 serving life sentences.

Inside the large visitors' room and smaller overflow room, children were able to join their fathers, dressed in blue work shirts and loose denim pants, at round tables. A dozen guards stood around the parameter in small groups watching the goings-on.

Some dads played board games or cards with their kids. Others watched their sons or daughters coloring crate paper Father's Day crowns. A few walked around cradling infants in their arms. But most remained seated, talking up a storm with their children, catching up on outside lives.

Steven Ponec had his elbows on a table, leaning close to his 19-year-old daughter Kameika. "Oh, I feel like I'm walking on a cloud," he said. "God blessed me to have this visit with my daughter. I'm riding so high, but I was nervous to come out here because I hadn't seen her in so long. There's so much I want to say, and it's hard for me to get it out, to express myself. And she's doing so great."

Without looking up from the sketch she was coloring, the teenager said, "I'm excited and I'm happy, 'cause it took me a long time to come. I was supposed to be coming for like three years. And I finally got here."

Her middle-aged father reported that he was a three-strike, nonviolent lifer who made a lot of mistakes when he was young. He'd served nearly four years at CMC but still had 19 more to go before he came up for parole. Still, the visit from his daughter gave him joy and hope.



"Being separated from your family, that'll break a man down," he said shaking his head. "I wasn't that great of a father to her, but I've always loved her, and I wouldn't bring nothing bad around her. I took a lot of bad turns and took a lot of bad advice. Now I'm where I can give some good advice. And this is the best Father's Day present I've had in my entire life."

Kameika nodded. "I think it's a good Father's Day," she said. "It would be better if he could leave."

At the other end of the room, Victor Calderon was playing the game Battleship with his two kids: Joshua, 3, and Ashley, 10. The young man from the San Fernando Valley has been incarcerated for four years and only had four months until his release. Due to personal restrictions, his wife could not visit him. But with a Get On The Bus chaperon, he was able to see his children in 2008, 2009 and again this year.

"Just to be here next to my daughter and be able to play with my son and feel them and have human contact, it gives me hope," he said. "Because when we're incarcerated, we lack human contact. Our human contact is pretty much zero. So being able to have a hug and kiss from somebody is special. Without that it's hard.

"It's a blessing," he added, looking from his son to daughter. "It's only once a year, but it's a blessing."

Ashley smiled. "He's still funny and awesome," she said. "I miss him a lot."

### Debriefing

By 2:30 p.m. - after a four-hour-plus visit at the California Men's Colony's East facility, which featured a pizza lunch - the 130 kids and their guardians or chaperones were back on the three big white buses. But there was one more stop on the outskirts of San Luis Obispo at the non-denominational Mountainbrook Community Church for a debriefing, where the children and teens could share their feelings in small groups, and then with the whole assembly if they wanted to about the visits with their dads.

Evan James, 17, stood with a cordless microphone in his hands. "It was a wonderful day," he said. "My dad's doing great. It's really rough on me and my brother and sister and my mom not having my dad around. It's great, though, being able to see him."



A teenage girl introduced herself as Ebony. "This is my first time coming to the program and I liked it," she noted. "I got to see my papa for the first time in a very long time. So, thank you, whoever."

But it was a little African American girl who garnered the most applause. "I had a nice time with my dad," she said, "and we made a crown, too."

Before the children left, they received "Stay Connected Bags," with a picture frame for the photo taken with their dad, cards and envelopes, two pens and Forever stamps. Moms and guardians got a handmade quilt. The guests walked out of the church carrying box lunches for the ride home.

Back on the bus, the big surprise was a black or brown teddy bear for each child. The kids hugged them as they waved goodbye to the church volunteers. Most kids and adults were asleep within a half-hour. But Lynn Slotsve, who coordinated the trip from Beverly Hills to the California Men's Colony, was wide awake. He said last year 10 buses from five different L.A. churches made the trip, but this year there were nine today and another 10 next weekend for Father's Day.

"These kids don't know if their parents are being beaten up in jail. They don't know if their parents still love them or even think about them. And they have no idea what their parents are doing," he pointed out. "So



they come up to the Men's Colony and they see that their fathers are still trying to be a father to them. They still love them. And they just come out with this smile on their face that they had the best day that they've ever had."

After a moment, the financial controller added in a softer voice: "This is the Lord's work. It needs to be done."

In 2000, Get On The Bus took nine families with 17 children on a single bus to the Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla. This year the program - started by Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet Suzanne Jabro and currently run by Maria Palmer - will take 1,200 children to California men's and women's prisons on some 60 buses. For more information on Get On The Bus, call Maria at (818) 980-7714, ext. 12 or visit [www.getonthebus.us](http://www.getonthebus.us).

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