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LIFE

Break from prison

4-H program helps incarcerated women connect with their families



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ENLARGE

Jessica Stewart/St. Joseph News-Press
 Zara Cox hugs her daughter Shaylynn Cox, 16, when she came to visit at the Chillicothe Correctional Center. Ms. Cox's children and her parents were participating in the 4-H LIFE program.

At a quarter to 3 p.m., Zara Cox starts to smooth her hair. She fidgets with her nails and dabs at the blue eyeliner that rims her eyes. She hopes the tears won't smudge it because she wants her daughter to see.

Zara didn't wear makeup before. Shaylynn is better at the kind of thing. Zara's 16-year-old used to style her for dates, used to make her up like a Kardashian. Zara pulls at her pant legs, though she knows it won't improve her outfit. Everyone wears the same orange jumpsuit and rubber sandals.

A window in the Chillicothe Correctional Center's visiting room offers a view of the front office to where families wait on flimsy plastic chairs. Every few minutes, an

officer escorts a group to the metal detector room. Zara locks her eyes on the window. She searches for her son Skyler in the gathering crowd of daughters, sons, nieces, nephews, sisters,

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brothers, husbands, mothers and fathers. She wonders out loud if her 12-year-old will make the hour and 15 minute drive from St. Joseph to the women's prison in Chillicothe, Mo., or if he's at his basketball game.

The visiting room door opens, and the first families trickle in. They embrace their inmates, ruffle hair, wipe tears and go sit at tables like the one Zara has claimed for her children.

If not for the jumpsuits and the security guards, the room would look like a high school cafeteria. Vending machines line the back wall. Families use their bag of quarters to buy chips and pizza and pop. They split open the chip bags so the guards can see inside.

The outside door opens, and Zara's family walks in from the temperate December afternoon, minus one 12-year-old boy. Shaylynn and Zara's youngest, Sayley, 10, wave through the two panes of glass that separate them from their mother. Her son SeAndre, 11, sits down with Zara's parents while they wait for their forms to be processed. Zara positions herself at the visiting room door for their arrival.

SHIFTING FAMILY

Two months ago, Zara joined 4-H LIFE, a program facilitated by the University of Missouri Extension to help inmates better connect with their families. Chillicothe, which started its chapter in August 2009, is one of three sites in Missouri that hosts the national initiative.

Monthly 4-H LIFE family meetings are less regulated than standard family visits and aren't limited to immediate family. No one has to keep their voice down. There's no maximum amount of hugs. The only time the guards interfere is to take roll call halfway through the visit.

In exchange, Zara and the other inmates attend two classes a week, one to plan activities for 4-H LIFE meetings and one on parenting strategies. Zara's classes have taught her how to find out what's going on in her children's lives. When she talks to them on the phone, she reminds them about the Golden Rule and doing the right thing. She's made big changes from how she used to parent, she says.

"I'll say things to them, and they'll be shocked I'm even saying those things," Zara says.

Twenty-three months ago, before her sentence, she'd be more likely to give her kids money than suggest they spend time together. That won't happen when she gets out in March. She looks forward to going to their ball games. She wants unbounded time with her four kids, especially because they often need more than a four-hour visit to adjust to seeing her again.

Zara's mother, Denise Cox, moved into Zara's house to help the kids adjust to life without their mother. But Denise is reminded daily she's no substitute.

“There’s a closeness probably that they have with their mother that they don’t have with me,” she says. “The bond between a mother and a child is different than a grandmother and her grandkids.”

4-H LIFE meetings try to address the strain prison puts on families by incorporating games and activities into the visits. Families worked on fleece blankets in November. Today, the December visit, they’re making Christmas cards to deliver to an area nursing home.

Not long after Zara’s family settles in, Chillicothe’s 4-H LIFE director, Richard Smith, invites the group to the front of the room. Zara, Sayley and Shaylynn pull up chairs with the rest of the inmates and their families. SeAndre stays back with his grandma and grandpa. He folds over the top of the table, his head resting on his folded arms.

Many of the other kids at the December meeting are much younger than SeAndre. Kristy Costner’s boy and girl are 5 and 6. They sit on their mother’s lap while Richard leads the group in a mumbled rendition of “Frosty the Snowman.”

Other families, like Judy Henderson’s, grew up with the prison visit routine. Judy’s been incarcerated for her teenage grandchildren’s entire lives. It’s Zara’s family’s third 4-H meeting. Judy’s grandkids, Jordan Wilson and Jarred Wilson, have been involved since the program started.

While everyone sings, Zara walks back and forth to SeAndre, who won’t look up at her. Denise talks to him for a while, finally convincing him to drag a chair over to the group. He sits, but faces away from the other inmates. He rejoins his grandparents during the ice breaker game. Some facets of life hold true inside prison as outside. Eleven-year-old boys pull away from their parents. They complain about being forced to spend all afternoon with their families. They’re too old for kids games and too young to pretend otherwise.

Zara lets him. She stays to play the game with Shaylynn and Sayley. One person throws a dodecagonal ball covered in questions, and the catcher has to answer the question under his or her right thumb.

Sayley’s question is “What makes you smile?”

Her response: “My mom.”

BREAKING THE ICE

After the game, the group disperses and goes back to making holiday cards. SeAndre tosses the conversation ball to himself for a few minutes before he returns to the table.

Denise and Sayley share markers. Shaylynn, all smiles, listens as Zara fills in Denise on what's been happening with her. SeAndre divulges a little bit about his girlfriend, and Sayley chimes in that she, too, has somebody special in her life.

Zara asks what they can do together when she gets out. Sayley wants to go skiing. SeAndre wants to go fishing. It's a topic that helps everyone at the table deal with her being gone, but it's a day that also makes Zara nervous.

"I don't know if I'm scared because I don't want to get out and mess up or if I'm just crazy," she says, when her kids are out of earshot.

She's learned not to take the small things with her family for granted, the requests for help with homework or for help getting something to eat. She wants to hear about her family's day-to-day problems, not just the ones her incarceration created.

Richard calls everyone together for one last round of carols before the catered meal comes in. This time, SeAndre goes over to the group on his own accord. He stands by his mother and grandmother and sings along with his sisters. Zara puts her arm around him and pulls him close.

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4-H Life is an awesome program. Thanks Rick!

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