

# Celebrating a Mother's Day for the 'Ladies'

By EVE MARX

My Mother's Day centerpiece is still going strong nearly a week after I brought it home from the first-ever Mother's Day Luncheon to benefit Hour Children. The reason I feel compelled to call attention to these flowers, a graceful arrangement of carnations, both pink and white, is because it was created by the "Ladies of Horticulture" and the pretty card printed by the "Ladies of the Printshop." The women who grew and arranged these flowers live behind razor wire. The same holds true for the ladies who designed and printed the cards. These women are residents of the Bedford Correctional Facility, the state's only maximum-security prison for women. The prison is located on Harris Road, just a blink away from some of Bedford's most desirable residential real estate properties.

The Mother's Day Luncheon, which was lovely, took place at Bedford Golf & Tennis. I was invited by a Katonah friend, Laura Beth Gilman. LB, along with her husband, Dan, serves on the board of directors of Hour Children. LB is a La Leche League leader who has been helping pregnant and breastfeeding mothers at Bedford Hills since 2011.

Hour Children recently held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of their new apartment house in Long Island City, which will provide housing to formerly incarcerated women. LB said that when she joined the board she was surprised to learn that over 70 percent of in-

mates of the prison are mothers of school-aged children.

At the luncheon, a sold-out event, I saw quite a few people I knew and was introduced to more I did not. I was very pleased to find myself seated beside Sara Bennett, the former Legal Aid attorney who presently acts as Judy Clark's pro bono lawyer. Sara recently published a photo essay booklet about the prison called "Spirit on the Inside." I was thrilled to chat with Sister Tesa Fitzgerald, Hour Children's executive director and founder. An ebullient woman, Sister Tesa was energized about the turnout. She also told me about a Mother's Day event at the facility in which 40 families were visiting 200 currently incarcerated women. "We're renting buses, it's an all-day event, Hour Children is paying for a breakfast and a lunch," she said. "The purpose is to keep moms and kids united."

The event at the country club, which LB described as a "friendraiser," was intended to acquaint more women in Katonah and Bedford with the work Hour Children is doing. LB said she felt strongly that "these women are our neighbors."

Hour Children does a lot of good things: They offer supportive housing, mental health services and a working women's program; they run the Children's Centers at both Bedford Correctional and Taconic; they are involved with Riker's Outreach; they have a mentoring program; and they have a community food pantry, an early-

learning program and their own thrift shop. One of the goals of the day was to encourage Bedford-area families to consider hosting a child for a week during the prison's Summer Program. Eleanor Arnold, a luncheon attendee who has been a host mother, said of her hosting experience, "It was one of the most rewarding things you can do, and transformative for our entire family."

Much to my delight, two former inmates approached the podium. Rosil Garcia, released last May, served 12 years. She said that while jail is a place where you are stripped of your humanity, with the help of Hour Children she became an active parent. She said her biggest problem upon release was securing employment. Housing remains a problem. "My goal is to have a home and a life where I am self-sufficient," said Rosil.

Anael Revil served eight years and was released in 2012.

"I was arrested at 21," Anael said. Her crime was the sale of drugs. She had a 3-year-old daughter, but because her family support network was poor, her daughter rarely visited. While on work release, Anael became pregnant. "I messed up," she said. "Being pregnant in Bedford, not good." She applied and was accepted to the nursery program. She lauded LB Gilman for teaching her how to nurse her newborn and bond with the child.

"What people don't understand is the internal struggle," said Anael. "You look at the things you missed

because of poor decisions that you made." She said that even though she is doing well, she still faces emotional challenges. She is thrilled that she is going to be living in one of the new residences in Long Island City. "The apartment is beautiful," she said. "Please support Hour Children, they know what they are doing."

The Hour Children program at Bedford Correctional is a model program, not just in the U.S., but internationally. "People come from all over the world to see how we work," said Jane Silfen. Ms. Silfen is the director of the Children's Center. She serves as the liaison between Hour Children and the facility administration and represents the organization to the media, advocacy groups and community organizations.

My takeaway from the lunch is that there are a lot of very good people in our community doing important social action work. It turns out that many people are exceptionally compassionate. Hour Children functions primarily on donations. It's easy to give. Love and money do make a difference. A gift of \$25 goes to children's birthday party supplies. \$50 supports teen programs. \$100 buys arts and craft supplies for the prison playroom for a month.

Mother's Day is over, although my centerpiece still looks wonderful. I like to imagine the incarcerated mother who created it, sending a message of love and beauty into the outside world.

For more information about Hour Children, visit [hourchildren.org](http://hourchildren.org).

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