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Prison dads complete parenting course at Sing Sing

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OSSINING - Being a good dad can be a hard job in the best circumstances. Being a father while serving a prison sentence can make it impossible.

In an era when parents hover on the sidelines of soccer games and applaud every note their kid ever plays in public, being a prison dad may sound like a contradiction in terms. But 25 inmates at Sing Sing Correctional Facility said they would happily buy into that contradiction, pledging in a ceremony yesterday to be family men even while they're "behind the wall," as they call it, incarcerated for violent crimes and other felonies.

The family-resource program at Sing Sing is marking its 20th year, and a service was held for graduates of a 16-week parenting course and their family members. The classes centered on childhood development, communications with young people, tools for lasting relationships and an honest examination of their own family histories.

"I'm a changed man," said Ishmael May. "I used to think that being a good parent meant providing material things. But it's so much more - words of support, 'I love you,' being there good times and bad. I no longer have the ability to be there physically, but nothing can prevent me from being there mentally, and showing that love is unconditional. I plan to be the best dad I can be."

May, who was reluctant to discuss his felony conviction, is a father to two young children.

Jermaine Archer, one of the graduates of the parenting program, swelled with pride as his 11-year-old daughter, Kaylee, sang a musical number for the ceremony. He said his daughter gave him hope and connected him to the world outside the walls.

"We want to shut down when we come here, leave family behind," Archer said in a small outdoor recreational area ringed by a chain fence and razor wire. "But they suffer, too, when we push them away." Archer, doing time on a murder conviction, said "It's a positive for me, something of value, to know I have a daughter who loves me." Smiling at his daughter and channeling a poetic muse, Archer said, "Walls, water, steel, it can't stop love. How's that?"

Wayne Hargrove, 62, said he lost all contact with his children.

"I took the program in case I find my kids, then I can be able to tell them, 'Listen, even after all these years we've never seen one another, I never stopped thinking about you, I never stopped loving you.'"

The classes are run by the Osborne Association, a non-profit organization that works with the prison community to provide counseling, substance-abuse prevention, education and job training. It was named after Thomas Osborne, a former Sing Sing warden who advocated for prison rehabilitation in the early 1900s and whose goal was to turn prisons "from human scrap heaps into human repair shops." The Osborne Association spends around \$100,000 a year at Sing Sing, running a play area where kids can interact with fathers and uncles, as well as providing educational programs.

Organizers of the parenting class say children benefit from contact with their fathers and are less likely to get involved in crime themselves. There is often a very strong commitment on the part of the inmates.

"They want to make a difference in a child's life; that's a real burning desire," said Randi Blumenthal-Gugigui, the Osborne Association program director at Sing Sing, "They're dads first, incarcerated second; that's the approach we take."

The ceremony, briefly delayed while a head count was repeated by correction officers, allowed prison dads to talk about the role of family in their lives, the chance they had to make up for past mistakes.

James Purdy, the deputy superintendent for programs at Sing Sing, said he could recall when state prisons offered a curriculum in the "school of hard knocks," and nothing more. Now the maximum security facility with a population of 1,750 inmates provides schooling to inmates that can take them from a high-school equivalency certificate to a master's degree. Speaking to the fathers, Purdy said, "This is your opportunity to say it's different from here on forward. Things are going to change. You're the torchbearer now."

Tom Ryer, sentenced on a robbery conviction, tries to get other prisoners to take classes on family relationships. "It helped me be a better person, and you have to be a better person before you can be a better parent," said Ryer, a father and uncle whose broad shoulders have hoisted many a young tot. "I'm honored when they come to visit me, and I have a big heart, and I have an ear. I listen to what they say."

He may have missed the milestones in his daughter's life, but Ryer didn't hesitate when asked about his parenting abilities: "I think I'm a great dad."
