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Prison brings mothers, children together

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BEDFORD HILLS - To reach his mother, Alon Harris passes through a labyrinth of electronic checkpoints, steel-barred holding pens and barbed wire-enclosed passages.

Along the way, the slender 14-year-old places his hand under purple ultraviolet lights so guards can check the stamped number verifying his identity.

Harris keeps any fear, frustration, excitement or anxiety to himself during the 15 minutes of "processing" at the maximum-security Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

At the end, Betina Harris, 39, is waiting for her son in the jail's Children's Center, a large, bright visiting area that resembles a school cafeteria.

Alon Harris and 15 other children have come for the final five-day session of an annual summer program, one of several projects run by the center that enable children to visit their incarcerated mothers. The center holds seven such sessions each summer.

Alon Harris lives in Albany with his grandmother, 19-year-old brother and 10-year-old sister. His sister attended the summer program in July. Betina Harris said her older son "is angry with his mother" and doesn't visit. But he talks with her on the phone.

Alon Harris hasn't seen his mother since a Mother's Day visit in May.

Asked how he feels about the obstacle course he faces before each visit, Harris answers without hesitation. "Happy because I get to see my mother."

Betina and Alon Harris have agreed to share some of their precious time together to describe how the Children's Center helps her remain involved as a parent, and helps the children cope with confusion, anger, shame and depression.

On the first day of their summer reunion, Betina Harris sits beside her son, clasping his hand, tussling his hair and wiping away her tears. The teenager makes no move to break free of her caresses and frequently turns his sad, dark eyes toward her, as if to reassure himself that she is really there.

Betina Harris is serving an eight-year sentence for attempted burglary and won't become eligible for release until June 2013. By then, Alon Harris will be 18.

"It's really hard on the children who are going through a lot," Betina Harris said, putting an arm around

her son's narrow shoulders. "They are ashamed to let people know their parent is in jail. Here he can ask questions. He knows he's not alone in this. It's hard when they leave, but I'd rather have it this way. I can still bond with them and watch them grow."

During her time at Bedford Hills, Betina Harris has participated in workshops on parenting, anger management, bereavement and domestic violence.

She is also working on an associate's degree in sociology so she can work and support her children once she is free.

"I didn't know my mother and my father didn't want me," she said. "There was a lot of hurt and pain because they turned their back on me. I'm learning patience and communication with my children."

During the summer program, children and their mothers spend up to six hours a day doing arts and crafts, reading, playing board games or cards, putting together photo albums, and sharing lunch and snacks.

They can also move freely to a small outdoor playground for basketball, relay races or a quiet chat on a porch-style wooden swing.

After several days together, Alon Harris and his mother have become more comfortable, less cautious around each other. He sits out a relay race on the playground involving large sponges and buckets of water while she participates. Later, he takes her hand and leads her back inside for another round of dominoes. She resists, saying they have played that game all morning.

"I beat her three times," the boy said.

They settle on Monopoly. When Alon Harris tosses the dice and lands on jail, the irony isn't lost on him.

"My mother's in jail and I'm just visiting," he says with a rare smile that reveals a new set of braces.

His eagerness to please her is clear. She mentions chocolate chip muffins - her favorite - and Alon heads directly for the vending machines. He returns bearing a cellophane-wrapped package that he places before her.

At 3 p.m., the program ends for the day. Local families pick up the children and bring them to their home for the night. The mothers return to their cells.

Alon Harris and 8-year old Edwin Lowe of Rochester are staying with the Rose family in Bedford. Edwin's mother, Amanda Lowe, 26, is serving a 7-year sentence for robbery.

Alessandra Rose piles the boys into her SUV alongside her two sons, Harry, 11, and Charlie, 9, and her 2-year old daughter, Berit. They head for the Bedford town pool. Several hours later, they are all in the Rose family's spacious kitchen rolling out dough and sprinkling toppings on individual pizzas. They talk about the video games they will play after dinner and the cake and ice cream that will mark the end of the day.

"They are lovely kids in a crummy situation," said Alessandra Rose, who has hosted weekend and summer visits for children of Bedford Hills inmates since 2002. "My job is to facilitate their visits with

their mothers. The kids want company and a safe place to sleep. It's been a really positive experience for us."

On the program's last day, Rose and her children accompany their guests to the Children's Center, where they meet the mothers.

"My kids say the Children's Center is like a big kindergarten," Rose said. "They like the moms very much and say they're very much like me."

For Alon Harris and Edwin, the last day means a few more hours to spend with their mothers before the next visit, at least a month away.

"I'll miss her a little bit, when I go to sleep at night," Alon Harris said. "I'll be happy when she gets out of jail and can come home."

Additional Facts

How to help

The Children's Center at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility thrives through the support of host families, other volunteers and community donations.

Contributions pay for the transportation of children to the summer program and for weekend visits with their mothers. Many guardians can't afford to pay to send the children, who may live many miles away or even out of state, to Bedford Hills.

To volunteer or learn more, call the Children's Center at 914-241-3100, Ext. 4050. To donate, send a check to the Children Center at 247 Harris Road, Bedford Hills, NY 10507.
