
City Limits

By Patrick Egan

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MOTHER'S DAY FOR INMATE 09G0379: A REUNION

Almost three quarters of the 2,422 women in New York state prisons are mothers. In part 2 of our series on children visiting their moms inside, families are briefly reunited.

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Almost three quarters of the [2,422 women](#) in New York state prisons are mothers. More than half of those women are from New York City or the surrounding suburbs. This story is the second in a three-part series looking at a recent trip by inmates' children to visit their moms on the inside. To read Part 1, click [here](#). For Part 3, click [here](#).

After the children moved from Albion's Visitors Hospitality Center to the less hospitably and more pragmatically named Front Gate Entry Building, the four sisters—Tamara, Serena, Dana and Sophie—were told to take off their shoes and belts, just a few feet from a gate of blue steel bars that opened to the secure part of the facility. Everything else, including Sophie's pacifier, had been left behind. "It felt like being put in jail," said 11-year-old Dana.

Once through their security screening, the girls passed into a fenced courtyard, then through a door that opened to a big room inside the main prison building. There was their mother. Sharon paused at first. She wasn't wearing her glasses. Her daughters were taller than she remembered. But she couldn't run to greet them anyway. A waist-high wall marked her boundary. The kids could go in, but she couldn't go out.

This was the first time all four sisters would be in the same room with their mother in nearly two years. It was May 2008 when Sharon, then living in Queens and working as a counselor to the mentally disabled, drove her car while impaired by an anti-depressant and struck and killed a pedestrian. (Sharon asked not to be identified by her real name, or inmate number, because she said the family of the victim had made repeated threats against her and her daughters.)

She hadn't seen any of her girls in person since transferring from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, in Bedford Hills, N.Y., to Albion in August 2009. The family had taken advantage of video tele-visits. Seeing your mother on a computer screen is a small comfort, because, as 11-year-old Dana pointed out, "You just want to hug her."

Virtual hugs and kisses will remain a fact of life for incarcerated mothers and their families. Prisons are the lifeblood of many small-town economies. Despite the fact that the majority of incarcerated men and women come from New York City, the state ships many of them great distances to serve their sentences.

When women enter New York State's prisons, there's no consideration given to how far away her family lives. "It's just not possible," William Powers, the Albion's superintendent, said. He explained that there are too few facilities to accommodate special requests. If a woman's sentence requires a medium-security prison, she's going to Albion, whether she lives in Bay Ridge or Buffalo.

In Albion's visiting room, Tamara, Serena and Dana moved quickly, swamping their mother. Sophie toddled around the group hug, confused, looking for a way in, and Sharon, wiping away

the tears, realizing the oversight, scooped the little one up. "She let you pick her up?" asked Tamara.

Tamara's question wasn't an isolated concern. Stacy Burnett sat by herself at one of the half-dozen tables scattered around the visiting room. Burnett ([inmate 09G0379](#)) arrived at Albion last April to serve five to 10 years for grand larceny, writing bad checks. She hadn't spoken to her son, Thomas, in almost a year. She knew that he called Kathy Dupont, Burnett's close friend and caregiver to Thomas, "Mommy." They live together in Highland, N.Y., 327 miles to Albion. Burnett was pretty sure this day would be a difficult one.

About 20 minutes later, Thomas came into the visiting room with another group of children and chaperons. Thomas separated from the group and walked slowly in his mother's direction. Then he veered off, passing his mother without a word, and made straight for a yellow toy dump truck resting along a back wall.

As the nation's prison population surged more than 400 percent over the last three decades, a number of studies concluded that inmates and their families [do better after incarceration if they are able to stay in contact during it. One study found that incarcerated men](#) and women who remained active with their families, in whatever ways possible, were able to picture themselves as people who were not just inmates.

"More than anything, I want to hear my son call me 'mummy' and know who I am," wrote Burnett, responding to a questionnaire several days after Thomas's visit.

Sharon had an easier time of it with Sophie, in no small part because of the affection the older sisters showed their mother. As the family sat around the table, tears replaced by smiles, talking about school classes and grades and the rest of everyday life beyond those walls, Sharon held Sophie in her arms. She'd wrapped a white blanket around her daughter.

The subject of fathers didn't take up much of the conversation. Sharon has always been a single mother, getting little to no help from her daughters' fathers. While Tamara's and Sophie's fathers do play a limited role these days, Serena and Dana have virtually no contact. They aren't the only ones. The father of Maria, from the Lower East Side, is also in prison. And Thomas's father, while providing support for his son, ultimately decided it was better for the boy to be raised by someone other than himself.

Sharon and her daughters focused on enjoying their time together. They played Connect 4, helped Sophie with a Mr. Potato Head and read the cards that the girls had made. Using the \$200 in quarters that Osborne had brought to pay for pictures, the family posed for Polaroid shots in front of a Winnie the Pooh bed sheet. If it weren't for the uniform and the correction officers watching to the side, it would have undoubtedly felt like a normal day, at least until the headcount.

With a few words—no shouts or aggressive commands—the COs ordered the women to line up in front of the main desk for a headcount. The children waited in the visiting area. Softly, each woman counted until the guards determined all present. Once ticked off the list, the incarcerated women were allowed to go back to the visiting area.

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