
City Limits

By Patrick Egan

Friday, May 7, 2010

MOTHER'S DAY FOR INMATE 09G0379: GRADUATION

Almost three quarters of the 2,422 women in New York state prisons are mothers. In Part 3 of a series, several moms take a crucial step toward going home.

[Patrick Egan](#)

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 third 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](#). To read Part 2, click [here](#).

Soon, the forest green of the women's uniforms gave way to purple graduation gowns, caps and tassels—a gift negotiated by Osborne's Diana Archer from a graduation-supplies company. The mothers were graduating a class that teaches them about discipline, communication and preparing to go home. It was more than just a ceremony: The successful completion of the class nudged these women one step further along the path to parole. And as a woman's release becomes more imminent, she often moves to a prison closer to home, according to William Powers, Albion's superintendent. Taconic, in Westchester County, is the preferred destination for women from New York City transitioning from prison to freedom.

The ceremony was like most graduations, except that there were more tears and the parents were going to the podium while the children sat in the audience. Mothers spoke about what they'd learned, recommitting themselves to the responsibility of parenting. One mother said, "I don't have to be perfect, I just have to be a better person." Another said, "It's the first time I ever completed anything, and I'm proud."

In addition to getting their own certificates of graduation, the mothers presented commendations to their children—appreciations for the strength and forgiveness they had shown. Sharon called each of her kids, except for little Sophie, a "scholar."

Stacy Burnett's son didn't make it to the podium. He'd run out of steam. That was okay with Burnett, as she got what she'd hoped for: the chance to feel like a mother. Thomas's head rested on her shoulder, and his arms wrapped around her neck.

"I thought I knew a lot" about parenting, Burnett said, reflecting on what she'd learned in class. "I learned I was a crappy parent." She said that she thought it was enough to hang around with Thomas and let him be creative, but she realized she was putting him in danger. She held no delusions about what Thomas' visit meant. She knew the day didn't make her "mummy," and that her friend Kathy Dupont would continue to be that person.

After the graduation ceremony, time grew short. As staff and volunteers cleaned up, the women and children of Albion went back to the section of the visitors center where they could continue enjoying "prolonged contact." On this day only, toddlers could sit on laps without time limit. Hugs could go on and on without a guard breaking it up. That is, until the five-hour visit was over.

Well before the children had arrived that day, Elizabeth Maldonado, leader of the parenting class, had prepared the inmates for the moment of departure. "I stress the importance of showing the children they're in control. The last thing they want is for the children to leave worried about them," she said.

And so the women shed no tears as their children left. It worked. One or two of the kids broke down, but for the most part they were strong. "Children need to know that their moms are okay," said Maldonado.

The absence of upsetting emotion didn't mean that it didn't exist. Sharon wrote after the visit that she and her daughters didn't say goodbye. "We said I'll see you later." She stayed brave as her children walked out the door. "But then I shut down for 3 days. I slept every chance I got, hoping to recapture those precious moments." The visit, she wrote, "helped me remember why I still exist."

Beyond the doors to the prison, the sun had disappeared and small flakes of April snow fell as the children boarded the bus just after 2 p.m. Because of scheduling, the return flight was from Buffalo, so the ride was a little longer. Kids drifted to sleep.

The roads, the airport terminal and the plane all looked and felt the same as the previous day's. But on the return flight, Charlie and his sister Anise, while watching cartoons on the mini-television, clutched Polaroids of themselves with their mother, new memories for home.

Once off the plane, Diana Archer called the trip's last head count before leading the group out of JFK and into the night. New York City was colder than the day before. The children of Albion gathered at the curb, waiting for a cab or a family member to pick them up—once again waiting.

Copyright © 2010 - City Limits is a project of the Community Service Society of New York, which is a 501(c)3 organization. [Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)
