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# Bedford-KatonahPatch



NEWS

## Families Host the Children of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

Summer visitation program helps ease the pain of separation for children of inmates.

By Rich Monetti August 16, 2010

The nature of family life these days often separates children from their parents. It may be due to divorce or just the requirements of a demanding job. Either way, the children lose.

Does the same need to connect apply when the situation is prompted by an extended stay in a correctional facility?

"A mother is a mother is a mother," says Alessandra Rose, director of the Children's Center at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Plus, the enormously undermining impact on the child of having a parent in jail doesn't deter a need for her, she added.

But when a child lives in Buffalo and has no way of getting to Bedford, it would seem to be mostly moot. Recognizing that problem, Sister Elaine Roulet felt something needed to be done about the significant pain incarceration was imposing on the children of inmates at Bedford Hills.

Funded with grants from the Department of Correctional Services, which Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens administer, the Children's Center she started 30 years ago has been helping to provide a remedy to this heartbreaking situation.

"The most important thing we do is the visitation program," said Rose.

So on Sundays, during the summer, the Children's Center provides transportation from mostly statewide locations to the facility, where children spend the day with Mom. At 3 p.m., local families pick up the children and host them for the rest of the week—giving them five full days of interactive programs with their mothers.

The visiting center, she said, looks like a big cafeteria, and behind that, with arts and crafts, a reading corner and plenty of windows, the center comes off more like a Kindergarten Class. Additionally, there's an outside playground with basketball courts, a jungle gym and swings.

In turn, the potential awkwardness of the initial walk-in can more easily be overcome among these normal distractions. On that footing, she said, children and moms can bond, relax and begin making new memories, while the chance arises to work through some of the issues they need to work through.

Of course, the parental attentiveness prior to arrest certainly varies, but either way, the pangs of motherhood do not dissipate. "She's still the mother," said Rose, and the tendency to utilize the parental resources and classes the Children's Center offers, is the rule rather than the exception.

In fact, for a lot of them, with our support, she says, "this is the mother at her best."

Though spending the week with an unknown family would be a stress on any kid, Cheryl Roman of Bedford, whose family has hosted for three summers, can say that kids are kids and they eventually jump into this situation like any other.

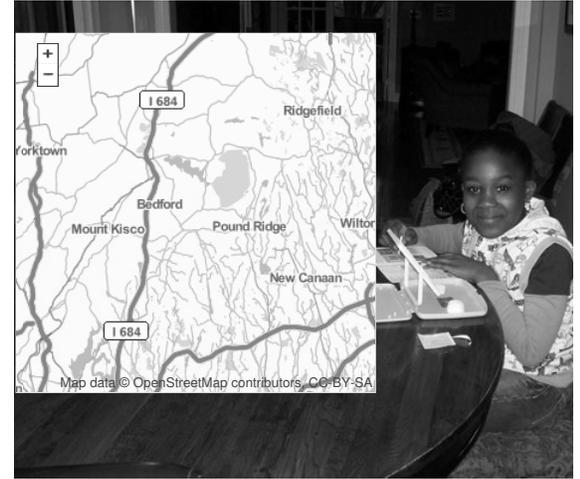
In the period of initial uncertainty, though, she has a sure fire icebreaker for the pickup at the prison. "I bring my little dog Mia," she said, "and the kids automatically gravitate to her."

Otherwise, in the case of the 11-year-old girl who is coming in for her third summer, it's old hat for all. And at night, since the day can be exhausting, the kids who the Romans have hosted love the backyard pool or are happy just to rent a movie with Roman's two teenagers.

Still, the evening can bring home the difficulties that are obviously inherent to this situation. Always receiving a heads-up on their day from the program, she says, if needed, I empathize with them. And then I try to get them to recognize some of the good things - they get this week together and other interactions throughout the year or their relationship is growing stronger.



PHOTOS (4)



PHOTOS



How well that works is obviously dependent on numerous factors. Nonetheless, Roman approaches the impact she can have as simplistically as possible. "You give them what you can," she said, because you never know what these visits will some day mean to them.

If you'd like to be a host family or participate in overnight visitations in the school year, contact Rose at 241-3100 Ext. 4050.



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