

New York women religious open doors for mothers released from prison

Zoe Ryan | Feb. 27, 2013

Sisters' Stories

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, ex-convict Jean Valjean in France fulfills his second chance with help from a bishop. Some female ex-offenders in New York today get a second chance because of an organization founded by women religious.

St. Joseph Sr. Teresa Fitzgerald is the executive director of Hour Children, a New York not-for-profit organization that helps mothers released from prison get their lives in order. It provides services inside and outside of prisons, such as housing, employment training, mentoring and day care.

Just-released mothers, a "totally forgotten about population," have hopes like anyone else and are often filled with guilt, said Fitzgerald, a former teacher, principal and administrator.

But options for these mothers are limited: A criminal record hinders the public housing hunt and the job hunt, she said. Trying to get re-established with a child or more to care for made every second-chance door seemed closed.

In the mid-1980s, Fitzgerald first heard of the troubles of children with incarcerated mothers from Sr. Elaine Roulet, a fellow Sister of St. Joseph in Brentwood, N.Y., who worked in the prisons *and had* founded Providence House, a New York not-for-profit to help recently incarcerated women transition into society.

Fitzgerald, known as "Sister Tesa," then devoted her heart and soul to working with incarcerated mothers and their children, becoming a foster parent in 1986 with four other sisters for children with mothers at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

As Fitzgerald helped children visit their mothers, she noticed another needed layer of service: homes for mothers upon release. That idea led to communal homes and work training. In 1995, that ministry became Hour Children.

Hour Children is so named as a reminder of what governs these children's lives, Fitzgerald said: the hour the mother is arrested, the hour each week children are permitted to see their incarcerated mothers, and the hour of reunification.

The sisters soon found empty convents and houses to make the current three communal homes in Queens for transitional housing and mothers on work release. The program serves women from New York state who are ex-offenders with a child and have nowhere to go. Currently, 50 mothers with about 70 children live at Hour Children homes. All houses and services are in Queens. Not all women live at the homes but will use the services.

If the women live in Hour Children's communal homes, they have a set schedule to help them recover. A sister lives in each of the houses to be a monitor and help the women.

Depending on what the woman needs, days are filled with various activities: computer classes, drug treatment, case management meetings, business etiquette classes, therapy with on-site counselors, mentoring; the women even gather for dinner and take turns cooking. During the day, their children are either at Hour Children's on-site day care, are in school or, later, at Hour Children's after-school program, reuniting with their mothers for dinner.

"There's a normality to it, but it's not a normality they're used to," Fitzgerald said. "It's learning that this routine is their friend and routine can be their new salvation for developing a whole new look at life."

As idealistic as this may sound compared with prison, Hour Children isn't for everyone.

"Sometimes people will come out and they're looking for just a place to flop -- that ain't us," she said.

Hour Children also owns two (soon to be three) permanent apartment buildings to which some of the women move with their children when they can afford a place.

The community bonding and support seems to be working. The rate of recidivism for the women from Hour Children is 3 percent. The recidivism rate of women in New York is 29 percent, according to a 2008 publication from the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

If a woman relapses -- common in recovery, Fitzgerald said -- Hour Children can work with parole. The woman enters detox, and Hour Children cares for her children. Once out, she'll get extensive treatment.

Rectifying lost relationships with older children can be painful because they have moved on without the mother. Sometimes, the women idealize what the relationship will be like, but they have to come to a sense of reality, to respect and realize that "this is the new mode," Fitzgerald said.

To prepare for the workforce, two of Hour Children's former clients run the Hour Working Women's Program, an employment training program where women learn job skills and protocol, a crucial step because many have not had a substantial education, Fitzgerald said. The organization partners with employers to match women with jobs.

Hour Children also runs thrift shops and a food pantry, providing materials and jobs for the women and the wider community.

Inside the state women's prison, Hour Children collaborates with three nonprofits to bring mentors to children whose mothers or fathers are in prison. The organization also has an adult mentoring program where community volunteers serve as mentors while the women are in prison and after their release.

The women "have a tremendous hunger to really rebuild their lives the right way, and they can't do it alone," Fitzgerald said.

In some New York prisons, a woman can live and bond with her baby in the prison nursery until the baby is 12 to 18 months old. If a woman's sentence extends beyond that period, she can give her baby to Hour Children to care for until she is released.

In December, after many years of helping mothers at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, the group took over the nursery program. For the last 12 years, it has run the family service program in Taconic Correctional Facility. (Both are in Bedford Hills, just north of New York City.) Hour Children social workers and advocates visit Bedford and Taconic every week to meet with women.

"We need more programs like Hour Children," said Tamar Kraft-Stolar, the director of the Women in Prison Project at the Correctional Association of New York, a nonprofit organization that advocates for a more humane and effective criminal justice system. The Correctional Association of New York has partnered with Hour Children over the years on advocacy issues.

"Our view is that there are few things as important as keeping families together" -- keeping children who can be with parents out of foster care and helping mothers and children keep relationships regardless of prison -- "and Hour Children does that," Kraft-Stolar said.

The day Fitzgerald retires, she said she hopes the organization is in as strong financial and strategic shape as it is now, even though the group constantly looks for resources and funding. It runs mainly on private donations. But the staff -- about 40 percent of which are former clients -- act frugally and receive enough donations.

"I've never bought a couch or a piece of furniture in my life for a house," she said. "People's goodness comes."

Fitzgerald was one of the [2012 CNN Heroes](#) ^[1], which profiles everyday people who are changing the world. St. John's University in New York honored Hour Children in 2010 with the Frédéric Ozanam Award, given to "organizations that have significantly improved the circumstances of the disenfranchised and advanced the cause of social justice."

Society looks at ex-offenders and say they're not worthy of a second chance, Fitzgerald said. "We say just the opposite."

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St. Joseph Sr. Tesa Fitzgerald with children from the after-school program at Hour Children (Photos courtesy of Hour Children)



St. Joseph Sr. Tesa Fitzgerald with children from Hour Children on Christmas



St. Joseph Sr. Tesa Fitzgerald and Hour Children families at the Christmas Party

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