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NYER OF THE WEEK

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NYer Of The Week: Liz Gaynes Helps Children Foster Relationships With Incarcerated Parents

By: John Schiumo



In New York State, more than 100,000 children have a parent in prison or jail, and many of these children remain invisible because of the stigma associated with having an incarcerated parent. This week's New Yorker is shining a light on that stigma and working to bring these children out of the shadows. NY1's John Schiumo filed the following report.

Liz Gaynes' life work is helping parents and children connect, even when they're separated by the law.

"My own kids had a father who went to prison, and what I learned was that the most important thing for them was meeting and being around other children with the same experience," Gaynes says.

As the executive director of the Osborne Association, Gaynes helps incarcerated parents understand they have the right, the responsibility and the capacity to meet the needs of their

children. She also helps children understand that they're not being punished because their parents are behind bars.

"It makes it less stressful. It makes it easier to know you're not the only one going through it," says Francis Adjei, a participant in the Osborne Association. "It makes it definitely easier."

"There's a lot of kids that are scared to talk about their problems, and I feel like the Osborne and many different programs just help out kids and get them loosened up," says Kharon Benson, a participant in the Osborne Association.

"Prisons may not be the ideal place to build a relationship, but you can, actually, we say that people can make, mend and maintain relationships while incarcerated," Gaynes says. "In almost every case, it's much better for the child to be able do that."

Gaynes fosters those relationships, arranging parenting courses, family counseling and visits in family prison centers.

Now, after more than 30 years of hard work, she is getting the recognition she deserves, and so is her cause. She was named a "Champion of Change" by the White House this week, and she saw the introduction of "Alex," a Muppet on Sesame Street with an incarcerated parent.

"If Alex or one of the Muppets can have this experience, and the way that they framed it was, really, 'You are not alone. Other people have had this experience,'" she says.

"The White House acknowledges that this is an important issue. These kids are in the shadows. They are invisible. What "Champions of Change" was able to do was make this issue visible."

So, for striving to make children with an incarcerated parent feel that they can come out of the shadows and into the light, Liz Gaynes is the latest New Yorker of the Week.

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