

Imprisoned Mothers Build Bonds with Daughters

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Just off Recharge Road west of town, past coiled barbed wire and a series of locked doors and gates, mothers and daughters are playing sand volleyball, passing a few minutes on this late Wednesday morning until lunch is ready.

There is Amy Delaney, a 31-year-old mother of three, who heard her 12-year-old Claire sing for the first time Tuesday.

In the past five years, while Delaney has served time at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women for meth possession and other felonies, her eldest daughter has become an accomplished and competitive singer. The mother has listened as others - even strangers - have told her how beautiful her daughter sings.

But until Tuesday, the only sound of Claire's singing she could conjure were the soft coos of a baby daughter trying to imitate her mother's lullaby.

There is Natalie Dominguez, 27, who has been separated from 9-year-old Quynh and two young sons for nearly two years.

Through the morning, through role-playing and interviews and the last hours of an overnight stay with Quynh, Dominguez has frequently dabbed tears from her eyes.

It's hard, stressful, her being in York, her children and husband in Lincoln. But today, for at least an hour more, her oldest daughter is with her.

"I'm happy that she's here, that I have this opportunity," she explains. "I am truly blessed."

Blessed, she says, that she has such a good husband, who is willing to bring her babies to this place every other weekend to see their momma.

Blessed she is allowed to keep her youngest daughter, 5-week-old Tailynn, with her here, at the nursery.

"I know I've hurt my children a lot. If I could take it back, I would," Dominguez says.

Quynh tells her mother frequently: When you come home, Mom, don't leave me again.

“That’s a promise I’ve made her,” Dominguez says.

An Omaha organization - R.E.S.P.E.C.T. - has come to the York women’s prison to conduct this workshop for seven inmates and their nine adolescent daughters, an effort to build relationships and teach parenting skills.

They did it with the support of a \$10,000 federal grant, routed through the Nebraska Health and Human Services System.

Patricia Newman, R.E.S.P.E.C.T. founder and chairman, said that over two days, the girls got lessons in healthy relationships, along with anti-bullying and behavioral strategies. They learned the difference between being assertive and aggressive and about boundaries, eye language and voice tone. And a biggie: impulse control.

Moms learned more about how to be a parent, both in prison visits and over the phone.

It is a pilot project, said Warden John Dahm, and an important part of the prison’s mission focused on mothers and children.

Benefits from this program should fall on the mothers and their daughters.

“Relationships between a preteen, an early teen, are hard in the best of circumstances,” he said.

“We’re trying to repair relationships, maintain already established relationships and to build relationships.”

Amy Delaney stepped on the path that led to York in her late teens.

She dropped out of school her junior year and later got into a relationship and then into drugs.

Maybe, she said, she took drugs to fill an emptiness after growing up without a dad. She was rebellious, searching for attention.

At 19, she found herself pregnant.

“I sobered up. I was so happy to have a baby. I stayed sober five years,” she said. “It was amazing ... life-altering. I was so in love with the idea of being a mom.”

Claire was born in May 1995 and on July 9, her mom - flowers in her dark hair - walked down the long steps at the Sunken Gardens and married her dad in front of the lily pond.

The marriage lasted three years.

As a single mom, Delaney worked hard to improve her life and felt good about herself and her

daughter. But she fell back into the relationship and got pregnant again.

“I was kind of devastated by that. I was scared,” she said. “I was beating myself up that I was having a child with someone I wasn’t married to anymore. That fear just grew and grew in me.”

She relapsed into drugs when her son was 3 months old.

“You lose all sanity when you’re using meth. You can’t function,” she said.

She didn’t use drugs around her children, she said.

But she knew they knew.

“Having looked in the eyes of other people who are high, you know,” she said. “And children are so sensitive. It has to be horrendous, terrifying.”

She began selling drugs to pay the bills and keep her habit going. Her mother stepped in with a court order and took the kids.

It saved the kids but crushed her.

“My emotions were torn apart,” she said. “Going home was like going into a house where your children have died, knowing it was all your fault.”

Her addiction spiraled out of control. For two years, she had little contact with her kids, and drugs or alcohol became her life. It ended with a federal indictment, another pregnancy and prison in 2002.

In prison with time to think and get clean and sober, her life changed. It never would have happened any other way, she is convinced.

The state will release her at the end of this year, but the feds want another 18 months.

Then she’s going home to her kids.

Claire says she has no memory of those years when her mom was in such a mess. But she can remember some of the good times before that.

This week she wrote her mom a letter and gave it to her Wednesday morning.

“Mother dearest,” it said. “First of all, I love you. Second, I love it when you tickle me. I remember when you did that when I was little. Third, amazing, my mother, yes, she is goofy. From: Crazy, loving, always cool, ready, easy. LOL.”

Claire.

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