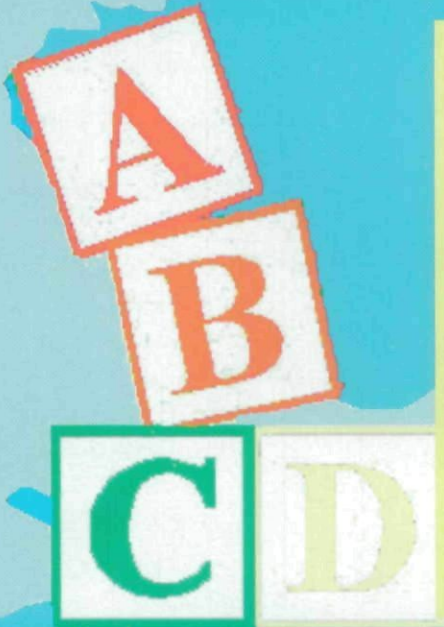


Don't Forget About the Children:

By Win Sisson

Parenting Education Behind Bars



Photos by Win Sisson

Walter A. "Mac" McFarlane, Department of Correctional Education (DCE) superintendent and Virginia Correctional Association president (left), Sue Kennon (center) and Felipe Cabacoy, DCE school board chair (right), pause for a photo at the ceremony recognizing Kennon's work with Moms Inc./Dads Inc.

Sue Kennon was seven months pregnant when the love of her life, Charlie Kennon, dove off a riverbank and struck a submerged log. He died instantly. In her grief, Kennon turned to drugs and began a dark period of life that would eventually take her away from her three children.

When she hit bottom, she was ready to end it all. In her desperation, she robbed small stores, and in her final criminal act, she pulled a broken pistol on a pharmacist. He responded with a pistol of his own.

His worked.

"I was intent on dying, and I didn't even feel the shots. I went out back and began running, the pharmacist chasing me," Kennon recalled. "After a minute or so, I remember saying to myself, 'You coward, you wanted to die.' Then I turned around and ran back to the pharmacist, fell on my knees, and begged him to shoot me in the head before the police came. I realized then that I was not afraid of dying; I was afraid of living."

When news got out about the Chesapeake, Va., mother, she was a sensation. Local television newscasters summarized it simply — "PTA mom turns to a life of crime."

Incarceration followed and when she was separated from the drugs, Kennon came clean, first in body, then in spirit. Part of this involved telling law enforcement officers everything. She confessed, and she kept talking even after they made subtle suggestions that she stop. Prosecutors used it all against her, and the courts were anything but lenient. When the gavel dropped, she faced a 48-year sentence.

Eventually, she became accustomed to life as an inmate at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women in Goochland, a rural area about 30 miles west of Richmond. The pain and sorrow never left, but she had accepted her fate. Her life was better, she realized. Kennon had regained her will to live and found some type of direction. With the help of a benefactor, she was about to earn a college degree in psychology, and her children were well. The thought gave her a sense of peace.

As she untangled herself from her addictive mind-set, her thoughts turned firmly toward her children. She wondered simply, how could she help them? Thus were sown the beginnings of her new life.

Life in prison, with the pain of its constant monotony, affected her, Kennon said. Looking around, she realized many incarcerated mothers were just like her. They loved their children, and they wanted to be part of their children's lives. Unfortunately, many had limited contact because caregivers could not afford to bring the children for visits or did not want the mothers to have contact.

Shame, anger and pain afflicted Kennon's children, and they acted out. They stole and skipped school. They fought to defend their mother's honor and isolated themselves. They, too, turned to drugs and alcohol.

Things could be much better, Kennon realized. But what could she do? At first, Kennon focused on becoming a grief counselor. Losing Charlie certainly was one of the worst things that ever happened to Kennon, but eventually she realized that being a grief counselor was not the answer. Then she considered being a substance-abuse counselor, but that seemed almost monotonous. Eventually, she turned her focus toward the children.

Using her newly minted psychology degree, Kennon began working as an inmate employee with staff of the Virginia Department of Correctional Education to create parenting education at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women. What evolved was an innovative, award-winning program that seeks to bridge the gap between incarcerated parents and their children.

Effects on the Family

"Quite often, people think a parent must be a bad person because they were convicted of a crime, and the parent must also be a bad parent. This is simply not true," said Jim Mustin, executive director of the Family and Corrections Network. "Sometimes becoming a good parent is the first step toward being that good citizen that society wants an offender to be."

The Families and Corrections Network Web site (www.fcnetwork.org) lists the distinct effects a parent's incarceration has on the family and especially the child. Some common effects are:

- Potential supporters withdraw, even in times of greatest need. There is often a sense of shame and a fear of being labeled. Many in society view inmates' families as guilty by association;
- Many families were already short on money before their loved one's incarceration and now are plunged into a struggle for economic survival;
- The justice system and its procedures are often baffling and frustrating;
- Maintaining ties between inmates and their families is difficult at best. Visiting conditions are usually

stressful. Prisons are typically located in remote areas not served by public transportation. Ties outside blood or marriage may not be recognized by the system. Self-confidence can be eroded by friends, family and society members who criticize a relationship with an inmate;

- When visits do occur, the happy and unhappy feelings and events of day-to-day life seem hard to talk about; and
- Over time, isolation can overtake relationships. This is especially hard for children involved.

The Child's Experience

The Family and Corrections Network notes several distinct problems children of inmates face. For instance, they are often present at their parent's arrest. In addition, many times, children of inmates are not told the truth about where their incarcerated parent is, which leaves them confused and questioning.

Children have to imagine answers to many of their questions. The experience might leave them feeling vulnerable and at fault. They might rebel, act on their anger and hurt, or simply withdraw. In their silence, they limit the ability of others to understand and offer help.

There are relatively few agencies or programs to help these millions of families. There is no government agency charged with the specific responsibility for the impact of the criminal justice system on families and children. This impact on families has been described as a series of crises: from arrest, to trial, incarceration and reentry, according to the Family and Corrections Network. Each of these crises can diminish a family's capacity to care for and support its members. Ultimately, the child of an incarcerated parent is at great risk. "As a group, these children

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Sue Kennon is honored for her innovative work by Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine.

have a large number of risk factors in their lives," Mustin said. "Incarceration is one of them, of course, but poverty and trauma in the family are others. It is hard to separate them out a lot of the time."

There are many children facing this type of risk in America. According to the Child Welfare League Web site (www.cwla.org), more than 7 million children in the United States have a parent under some form of correctional supervision. Fifty-eight percent of the children are younger than 10, and the average age is eight.

Virginia's Effort

To understand the program Moms Inc./Dads Inc. one must first know that the effort in Virginia possesses many of the same goals of any other parenting program. These goals are:

- Increase parental confidence;
- Improve parenting skills;
- Improve parent-child relations;
- Reduce child behavior problems;
- Improve child cooperation, self-esteem adjustment and academic performance; and
- Strengthen families.

Like any parent, incarcerated parents must maintain a high sense of responsibility to their children. What sets incarcerated parents apart, literally and figuratively, are their circumstances. "They must also learn, as must all other mothers and fathers, to parent — to the greatest extent possible despite their situation," Kennon said.

Incarcerated parents must reach out to their children in unique ways. "The goal is to strengthen that bond, and communication is the key," Kennon said. "Parenting education programs should act as a mechanism to strengthen relationships between the incarcerated parent and child/children and caregivers."

Furthermore, parent education should offer incarcerated parents a clearer understanding of the impact of parental incarceration on the lives of their children at different developmental stages and the caregivers involved. Many inmates have little idea of the impact incarceration has on their children, Kennon explained.

Inmate-parent education also could offer parents insight into problematic situations that their children and caregivers might encounter. Incarcerated parents equipped with this knowledge might be able to communicate more positive messages to their children. They could learn skills to facilitate changing or diminishing their children's negative behavior problems and also learn how to use these skills during visits and telephone calls and in letters.

Moms Inc./Dads Inc.

The Virginia Department of Correctional Education began the Moms Inc. parenting program in 1999. Recently, the program was expanded from two to five facilities and now includes fathers. For eight weeks, inmates attend a weekly class, which is designed to educate parents and help rebuild broken families. The primary goals of Moms Inc./Dads Inc. are:

- Providing education, information and support for incarcerated parents that allow them to understand the social, psychological and emotional problems their children might encounter; and
- Improving the quality of the present and future relationships between the parents and their children.

Moms Inc./Dads Inc. aspires to increase parents' level of self-esteem through education and information, knowledge, and support concerning the impact of incarceration on their children. Knowledge may lead to empowerment and a renewed sense of identity as a parent.

Program objectives focus on legal problems that many parents experience during their incarceration, such as custody, visitation and termination of parental rights. When mothers and fathers enter the system, no one tells them the difficulties they will face as parents and the difficulties that their children and the caregivers may face. These

issues are laid out in explicit detail for those enrolled in Moms Inc./Dads Inc.

Communication is one of the most important components of the curriculum. Visitation, phone calls and letters provide a foundation for present and future relationships. Maintaining communication is fundamental to keeping stable, consistent relationships and increasing the parent/child bond. The program emphasizes that, while a parent

may not be able to talk to his or her children on the phone or see them for visits (depending on relationships with the caregivers, location, economic situation, etc.), he or she can write letters. Another major curriculum component addresses the child's feelings. Typically, the child of an incarcerated parent experiences a range of negative emotions, including fear, anxiety, anger, guilt, shame, sadness and isolation. Parents in the program learn about these reactions and how to address them. The curriculum also aims to improve participants' self-esteem and self-efficacy, so that they may become more empowered and engaged as parents.

Cultural differences are addressed through discussions of social context. Simple lessons and real-life experiences are used to demonstrate the complex concept that beliefs, priorities and family structure are multidirectional and interactive. Additionally, participants view problem-specific videos and hear volunteer guest speakers. Often, these address problems children may face at different developmental stages.

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The program is an institutionally based, voluntary parent-education program. Participants appear to be motivated by the love of their children and a natural desire to strengthen relationships. As an extra privilege — inmates in the program earn the right to send their children an audio message in which they talk to the child or record a book on tape.

Coming Full Circle

While incarcerated for almost 15 years, Kennon earned her undergraduate degree in psychology from Ohio University. Two years from the day of her release, she earned her master's degree in psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University. Kennon's studies focused on the effect of incarceration on children of inmates.

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Today, her children have grown to adulthood, and Kennon works full time for the Department of Correctional Education as the coordinator of Moms Inc./Dads Inc. For her innovative efforts, this past spring, Kennon received one of seven awards given to state employees by Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine.

"We're very proud of her," Walter A. "Mac" McFarlane, the correctional education department's superintendent, said. "In certain circumstances, former prisoners, such as Sue Kennon, make excellent employees," he added. "They know how the system works, what can best benefit inmates. Plus, inmates look to them to get some incentive."

Kennon's advice to a female inmate is simple: "Define yourself; don't let anyone else do it for you. You have to choose your own direction. I believe it is our responsibility to dispel those stereotypes that women in prison are mysterious creatures with busy eyebrows and protruding foreheads, doomed to a terrible social lifestyle. We can dispel that by our success."

Win Sisson is a public relations specialist for the Virginia Department of Correctional Education. For more information, contact Sue Kennon, Parenting Education Coordinator, Virginia Correctional Center for Women, P.O. Box One, Goochland, VA 23063; (804) 784-3582, ext. 3754.

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Corrections Today 2007 Editorial Calendar

FEBRUARY

The 21st Century Work Force. The work force is changing constantly. How will the corrections field respond? Possible topics include: leadership and staff development, staffing, training, the aging work force and grooming new leaders, and the changing expectations of today's work force.

APRIL

Reentry. The issue of offender reentry and reintegration into society has become a primary concern for the corrections field. In this issue, we will look at the barriers to successful reentry, why this phase in the criminal justice system is so critical, and what those in different areas of corrections can do to make it work.

JUNE

Best in the Business. Our 17th annual Best in the Business issue once again will recognize top correctional staff. This issue also will include subtheme articles on technology and security. The annual Buyers' Guide, which includes a listing of the best products and services in the business, will also be mailed with the issue. *Submission deadline: Jan. 10, 2007.*

AUGUST

Female Offenders. Female offenders can present some unique challenges in the corrections environment. This issue will look at how corrections can work with this population and programs specific to female offenders. Also included will be a subtheme on special needs offenders. *Submission deadline: March 14, 2007.*

OCTOBER

Medical and Mental Health Care. Correctional health care and mental health care continue to be a major topic of discussion among those in corrections. This issue will explore various aspects of medical and mental health care including working with community health care agencies, standards of care and the unique needs of the corrections population. A subtheme on the Prison Rape Elimination Act also will be included. *Submission deadline: May 16, 2007.*

DECEMBER

Correctional Research and Evidenced-based Practices. Solid research should form the basis of correctional programming. Articles will address why research is important and how it can be used by practitioners. This issue also will include subtheme articles on legislative issues. *Submission deadline: July 11, 2007.*

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