

A Reason
to Change
“There’s no going
back now,” says
Garcia (having
lunch with
daughter Aryanna
while a guard looks
on). “I can’t wait
for our future.”

A mom, her daughter and a 5-year prison sentence

Raising a Baby Behind Bars

THE NURSERY PROGRAM AT THE WASHINGTON CORRECTIONS CENTER FOR WOMEN ALLOWS INMATES LIKE KAREN GARCIA TO KEEP THEIR BABIES WITH THEM—AS THEY LEARN TO BE BETTER PARENTS



By **CAITLIN KEATING** Photographs by **ELINOR CARUCCI**

It's 7:30 on a rainy weekday morning, and Karen Garcia is chasing her rambunctious 2-year-old daughter Aryanna down the hallway and into the bathroom to brush her teeth.



Minutes later the toddler's picking out her own outfit for the day and clambering into her stroller for the short ride to daycare. "For a moment everything seems normal," says Garcia, 40. "And then I'm reminded where I am because there are barbed-wire fences everywhere."

Since November 2015 Garcia's "normal" has been raising her daughter behind those tall fences at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Wash.—one of only 11 states in the U.S. that offer a prison nursery to its inmates with young children. Under the program, which was founded in 1999, women in the minimum-security facility with sentences up to 30 months can apply to keep their children with them until they're released. Inmates accepted into the program, called the Residential Parenting Program at WCCW, also receive drug treatment and therapy and are taught everything from how to prepare healthy meals and change diapers to bath-time safety. The goal is to send them back to society with the skills to be a good parent. "This program has saved my life," says Garcia, who was seven months pregnant with Aryanna when she was arrested in October 2015 and was later found guilty of selling methamphetamine and a firearm. "It's made me into a mother I never could have been

if I were out on the streets." Says Sonja Alley, the correctional-unit supervisor for the program: "Karen's done tremendous work on herself and addressing the issues that brought her here. A lot of these women have lost everything, so the struggle is really creating an entirely new sober life when they get out."



A sober, stable life is something Garcia has only dreamed of. Raised in Enumclaw, Wash., she grew up with a single mom who worked as a medical assistant. At 18, she gave birth to a son, Boston, and by the time she was 22, the pressures of holding down two jobs and the death of her grandfather led her to abuse alcohol and try methamphetamine for the first time. "Everything went downhill from there," says Garcia. She went to prison twice for identity theft—serving three years and two years respectively—

while Boston was sent to live in Renton, Wash., with his dad, who got full custody. "I remember Boston telling me, 'Mom, high or not high, all I've ever wanted was a mom. All I want is just you being in my life,'" recalls Garcia. "I had put him through so much pain and heartbreak."

Which is why, following her arrest and conviction, she vowed things would be different this time

A Childhood in the Yard

1. "Aryanna gets to enjoy life and be happy here," says Garcia (with her daughter and Officer Julie Dodson at the playground behind her living quarters). "She's always smiling and is so upbeat."

2. "She loves grabbing the phone from me and talking to her grandma—or pretending to!" says Garcia. "We call her every day out on the yard."

3. "When I get out, I'm going to live in a different setting with the lifestyle I want to surround myself with," says Garcia (in the prison yard). "I'm not going to depend on anything but my family and God's grace for support."

'Having this child finally has made me change my life around'

—KAREN GARCIA



around. “I didn’t want to abandon my daughter like I did my son so many years ago,” she says. “I wasn’t willing to do that again.”

It was in October 2015 that Garcia first heard about the Residential Parenting program. Although she had been sentenced to 60 months—with 20 of those months to be waived as long as she maintained good behavior—she decided to apply anyway. “The only thing I could do was fight for my daughter,” says Garcia, who gave birth on Feb. 2, 2016. “I could fight to get into the program. I just wasn’t going to take no for an answer.” She wrote to prison officials pleading her case, and when she found out she’d been accepted, she says, it was “a feeling I’ll never forget. . . . My mornings are better here than they would be if I was home. My daughter doesn’t see any of the things that I’ve seen before I got here. She gets to wake up to a mother who loves her unconditionally. This is my second—and only—chance.”



Now sober for almost three years, Garcia is determined to make the most of her future—and Aryanna’s. “It was really hard for me at first,” she admits. “I had done drugs every single day, [so] I was an emotional wreck. My daughter cried, and I would freak out. I had to figure out what this different life was all about.”

Learning how to manage her feelings and cope with adversity has also given Garcia the emotional foundation she needs to care for her daughter—who was diagnosed with celiac disease last year. “She was in a lot of pain all the time; it was





Quality Time
“There is the life I lived before my daughter,” says Garcia, “and the life I live now. This one is bright and promising.”

a once-a-month trip to the ER,” recalls Garcia. “Everything about my old life just vanished. . . . Nothing else mattered to me anymore, other than what my daughter was feeling and taking away her pain.”

As part of the prison’s Trades Related Apprenticeship Coaching program, Garcia has been learning carpentry skills and hopes to secure a well-paid job with labor-union benefits pending her release on Feb. 23, 2019—just one day before her 41st birthday. “I’m going to be able to get out, be a mom and have a career,” she says.

She plans to move in with her uncle in Auburn, Wash., where she can get a fresh start, and hopes to rebuild her relationship with Boston, now 23, who lives in Tacoma and is studying to become a pastor. The two talk regularly, and he has visited her and Aryanna in prison several times. “If I don’t go back to anything I used to do,” says Garcia, “I feel like our relationship is going to be amazing. He’s a very forgiving and understanding, loving boy.”

Garcia is also looking forward to reuniting with husband Jason Garcia, whom she married on July 5, 2014. Currently serving 87 months at Monroe Correctional Complex in Monroe,

It’s beautiful to see the interaction between Karen and Aryanna’

—SONJA ALLEY,
CORRECTIONAL-UNIT
SUPERVISOR



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Wash., on several charges—including unlawful possession of a firearm—he has a tentative release date of April 30, 2019. Although he and Aryanna have never met, she calls him Daddy during their monthly phone calls.

Those who know Garcia both inside and outside the concrete walls have no doubt that she’ll succeed. “This program has saved her life,” says Garcia’s mom, Cheryl Thoenes, 62, who now lives in Spanaway, Wash., close enough so she can take Aryanna home with her every other weekend for some quality grandma time. “Her whole life revolves around that little girl. She’s become a fierce mother and the woman that I always wanted her to be. It’s a miracle.”

WCCW’s Alley agrees. “Seeing the change in these women is the best part,” she says. “It’s rewarding to see them recognize their faults and, in turn, become better mothers.”

For now, Garcia says she is simply focused on raising her daughter and getting ready for life on the outside. “I’ve opened my eyes and changed my life around,” she says. “I’m not a bad person, but I made bad choices. Your past doesn’t have to define you, and it doesn’t define your future.” ●

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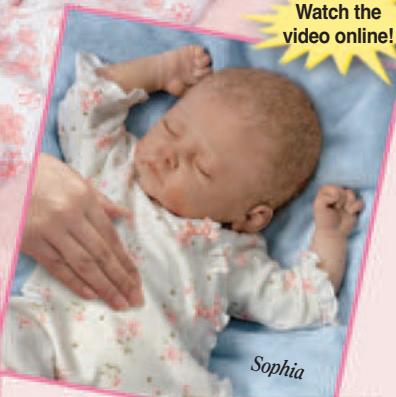
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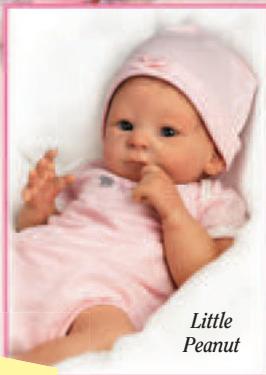


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