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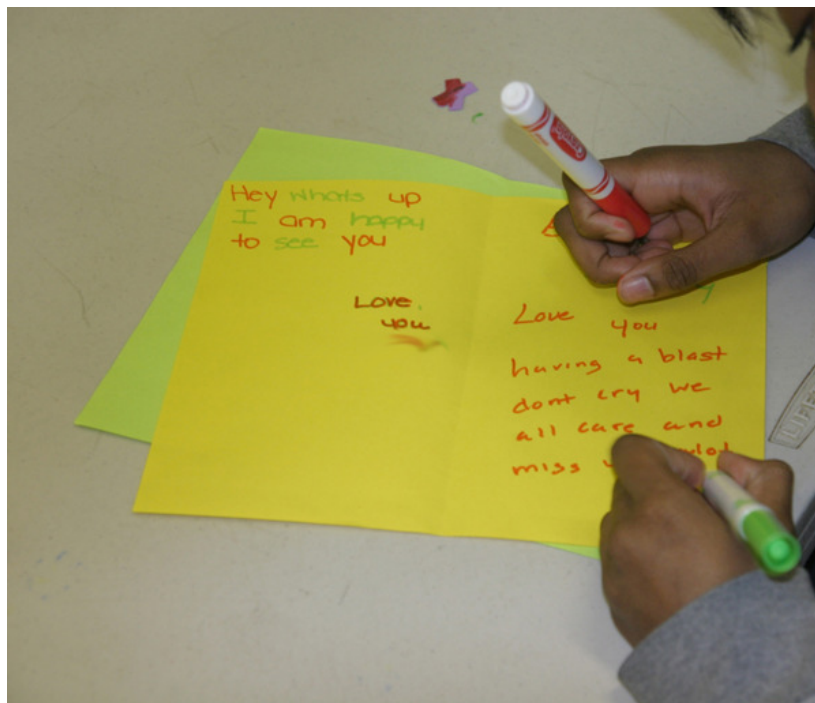
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Mother's Day For Inmate 09G0379: The Waiting

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Almost three quarters of the 2,422 women in New York state prisons are mothers. In part 1 of a three-part series, we follow one group of children as they travel nearly 400 miles to meet their moms on the inside.

By [Patrick Egan](#)



Patrick Egan/City Limits

One of the children preparing to visit Albion prison prepares a card for her mother.

On a Friday morning in April, a yellow school bus rumbled over train tracks and onto the parking lot of the Albion Correctional Facility in Albion, N.Y. These were the last few feet of a journey that had started before the previous day's dawn.

"This is jail," said Maria, a four-year-old from Manhattan's Lower East Side, to her chaperon. Maria wore a white taffeta dress embroidered with lavender flowers. Glittery silver shoes further dolled up the outfit. Her curly brown hair fell over the gray hoodie she wore against the chilly upstate air.

The bus came to a stop and its 15 young passengers got off. All had at least one thing in common: Their mothers were incarcerated at this medium-security state prison, the state's largest for women, located about halfway between Rochester and Buffalo. All but one of the kids on the trip live in the New York City area, nearly 400 miles away from Albion.

Almost three quarters of the [2,422 women](#) in New York state prisons are mothers, according to the [Women in Prison Project](#), a nonprofit effort to advocate for incarcerated females. More than half of those women are from New York City or the surrounding suburbs. That puts the mothers from the city serving at Albion between seven and eight hours away from their kids.

From the bus the children filed into the Visitors Hospitality Center, where all visitors to Albion register before entering the prison. The room was quiet. Fridays are not official visiting days. This was a special event, set up by the [Osborne Association](#), a New York City nonprofit that advocates for incarcerated people and their families.

Four sisters from Queens took the seats closest to the door, as if they knew they'd be first into the prison. Tamara, 18, a freshman at John Jay College, held her sister Sophie, 2, on her lap. Serena, 14, and Dana, 11, sat next to them. (The names of all children mentioned in this article have been changed out of concern for their privacy and safety.) Sophie worked a blue-green pacifier around her mouth. Her sisters' faces held blank, almost tired looks. They knew they were a few hundred yards from the mother they hadn't seen since August.

"My stomach started hurting," Serena said later. "I was anxious. I wanted to see her. And then we had to sit and wait."

Waiting is something Serena and her counterparts on the bus have much experience with. Inmate mothers often are the only parent in their children's lives, according to the Women in Prison Project. The vast distance between Albion Correctional Facility and New York City is a huge obstacle by itself. Couple those miles with the circumstances of poverty these families often shoulder, and regular visits are extraordinarily difficult and prohibitively expensive.

Twice a year, through the Osborne Association's Family Ties program, led by Diana Archer, the nonprofit shuttles up to 25 kids north. It's too far to drive. With a team of volunteer chaperons, many from St. James Church on Madison Avenue in Manhattan, the children take a short flight to Rochester, and everyone stays in a hotel for the night before visiting the prison the following day. The trip is free for the children—making it a lifeline for families too poor to afford the journey on their own.

"Poverty is at the top of the line of reasons" for why families can't make it to Albion, said Elizabeth Maldonado, who's been teaching the parenting class for Osborne for several years. She

said that children of incarcerated parents often end up with a grandparent, and that they usually need financial support from social services. "It's never enough," Maldonado said of those benefits. "They only do the bare minimum. It just gets [families] to the poverty level. It's not enough to do extracurricular stuff, like visiting their mother."

Linda Smith, the grandmother to the four girls, is making it, but not by much. "With shoestrings, we manage," she said. Smith feeds four growing girls and herself on an administrative assistant's salary and a little bit of public assistance. The city recently cut the family's food stamps because Tamara was going to college and not participating in a welfare work program. "The welfare department is disgusting," said Smith.

The journey to Albion had begun before dawn on the previous day, as children left their homes in New York City for rides to the airport. From a plane they took a bus to the Vineyard Church in Rochester, where they killed time playing UNO, Go Fish and basketball, and crafting cards bearing messages of love and congratulations for their mothers. They played in a pool, went to bed, and got on the bus again to visit their moms in jail.



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When a group of children visited their mothers in Albion Correctional Facility last month, the moms and kids were permitted more physical contact than prison visits usually involve.

After the children moved from Albion's Visitors Hospitality Center to the less hospitably and more pragmatically named Front Gate Entry Building, the four sisters—Tamara, Serena, Dana and Sophie—were told to take off their shoes and belts, just a few feet from a gate of blue steel

bars that opened to the secure part of the facility. Everything else, including Sophie's pacifier, had been left behind. "It felt like being put in jail," said 11-year-old Dana.

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Once through their security screening, the girls passed into a fenced courtyard, then through a door that opened to a big room inside the main prison building. There was their mother.

Sharon paused at first. She wasn't wearing her glasses. Her daughters were taller than she remembered. But she couldn't run to greet them anyway. A waist-high wall marked her boundary. The kids could go in, but she couldn't go out.

This was the first time all four sisters would be in the same room with their mother in nearly two years. It was May 2008 when Sharon, then living in Queens and working as a counselor to the mentally disabled, drove her car while impaired by an anti-depressant and struck and killed a pedestrian. (Sharon asked not to be identified by her real name, or inmate number, because she said the family of the victim had made repeated threats against her and her daughters.)

She hadn't seen any of her girls in person since transferring from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, in Bedford Hills, N.Y., to Albion in August 2009. The family had taken advantage of video tele-visits. Seeing your mother on a computer screen is a small comfort, because, as 11-year-old Dana pointed out, "You just want to hug her."

Virtual hugs and kisses will remain a fact of life for incarcerated mothers and their families. Prisons are the lifeblood of many small-town economies. Despite the fact that the majority of incarcerated men and women come from New York City, the state ships many of them great distances to serve their sentences.

When women enter New York State's prisons, there's no consideration given to how far away her family lives. "It's just not possible," William Powers, the Albion's superintendent, said. He explained that there are too few facilities to accommodate special requests. If a woman's sentence requires a medium-security prison, she's going to Albion, whether she lives in Bay Ridge or Buffalo.

In Albion's visiting room, Tamara, Serena and Dana moved quickly, swamping their mother. Sophie toddled around the group hug, confused, looking for a way in, and Sharon, wiping away the tears, realizing the oversight, scooped the little one up. "She let you pick her up?" asked Tamara.

Tamara's question wasn't an isolated concern. Stacy Burnett sat by herself at one of the half-dozen tables scattered around the visiting room. Burnett ([inmate 09G0379](#)) arrived at Albion last April to serve five to 10 years for grand larceny, writing bad checks. She hadn't spoken to her son, Thomas, in almost a year. She knew that he called Kathy Dupont, Burnett's close friend and

caregiver to Thomas, "Mommy." They live together in Highland, N.Y., 327 miles to Albion. Burnett was pretty sure this day would be a difficult one.

About 20 minutes later, Thomas came into the visiting room with another group of children and chaperons. Thomas separated from the group and walked slowly in his mother's direction. Then he veered off, passing his mother without a word, and made straight for a yellow toy dump truck resting along a back wall.

As the nation's prison population surged more than 400 percent over the last three decades, a number of studies concluded that inmates and their families [do better after incarceration if they are able to stay in contact during it. One study found that incarcerated men](#) and women who remained active with their families, in whatever ways possible, were able to picture themselves as people who were not just inmates.

"More than anything, I want to hear my son call me 'mummy' and know who I am," wrote Burnett, responding to a questionnaire several days after Thomas's visit.

Sharon had an easier time of it with Sophie, in no small part because of the affection the older sisters showed their mother. As the family sat around the table, tears replaced by smiles, talking about school classes and grades and the rest of everyday life beyond those walls, Sharon held Sophie in her arms. She'd wrapped a white blanket around her daughter.

The subject of fathers didn't take up much of the conversation. Sharon has always been a single mother, getting little to no help from her daughters' fathers. While Tamara's and Sophie's fathers do play a limited role these days, Serena and Dana have virtually no contact. They aren't the only ones. The father of Maria, from the Lower East Side, is also in prison. And Thomas's father, while providing support for his son, ultimately decided it was better for the boy to be raised by someone other than himself.

Sharon and her daughters focused on enjoying their time together. They played Connect 4, helped Sophie with a Mr. Potato Head and read the cards that the girls had made. Using the \$200 in quarters that Osborne had brought to pay for pictures, the family posed for Polaroid shots in front of a Winnie the Pooh bed sheet. If it weren't for the uniform and the correction officers watching to the side, it would have undoubtedly felt like a normal day, at least until the headcount.

With a few words—no shouts or aggressive commands—the COs ordered the women to line up in front of the main desk for a headcount. The children waited in the visiting area. Softly, each woman counted until the guards determined all present. Once ticked off the list, the incarcerated women were allowed to go back to the visiting area.



Pat

rick Egan/City Limits

The successful completion of the class nudged these women one step further along the path to parole.

Soon, the forest green of the women's uniforms gave way to purple graduation gowns, caps and tassels—a gift negotiated by Osborne's Diana Archer from a graduation-supplies company. The mothers were graduating a class that teaches them about discipline, communication and preparing to go home. It was more than just a ceremony: The successful completion of the class nudged these women one step further along the path to parole. And as a woman's release becomes more imminent, she often moves to a prison closer to home, according to William Powers, Albion's superintendent. Taconic, in Westchester County, is the preferred destination for women from New York City transitioning from prison to freedom.

The ceremony was like most graduations, except that there were more tears and the parents were going to the podium while the children sat in the audience. Mothers spoke about what they'd learned, recommitting themselves to the responsibility of parenting. One mother said, "I don't have to be perfect, I just have to be a better person." Another said, "It's the first time I ever completed anything, and I'm proud."

In addition to getting their own certificates of graduation, the mothers presented commendations to their children—appreciations for the strength and forgiveness they had shown. Sharon called each of her kids, except for little Sophie, a "scholar."

Stacy Burnett's son didn't make it to the podium. He'd run out of steam. That was okay with Burnett, as she got what she'd hoped for: the chance to feel like a mother. Thomas's head rested on her shoulder, and his arms wrapped around her neck.

"I thought I knew a lot" about parenting, Burnett said, reflecting on what she'd learned in class. "I learned I was a crappy parent." She said that she thought it was enough to hang around with

Thomas and let him be creative, but she realized she was putting him in danger. She held no delusions about what Thomas' visit meant. She knew the day didn't make her "mummy," and that her friend Kathy Dupont would continue to be that person.

After the graduation ceremony, time grew short. As staff and volunteers cleaned up, the women and children of Albion went back to the section of the visitors center where they could continue enjoying "prolonged contact." On this day only, toddlers could sit on laps without time limit. Hugs could go on and on without a guard breaking it up. That is, until the five-hour visit was over.

Well before the children had arrived that day, Elizabeth Maldonado, leader of the parenting class, had prepared the inmates for the moment of departure. "I stress the importance of showing the children they're in control. The last thing they want is for the children to leave worried about them," she said.

And so the women shed no tears as their children left. It worked. One or two of the kids broke down, but for the most part they were strong. "Children need to know that their moms are okay," said Maldonado.

The absence of upsetting emotion didn't mean that it didn't exist. Sharon wrote after the visit that she and her daughters didn't say goodbye. "We said I'll see you later." She stayed brave as her children walked out the door. "But then I shut down for 3 days. I slept every chance I got, hoping to recapture those precious moments." The visit, she wrote, "helped me remember why I still exist."

Beyond the doors to the prison, the sun had disappeared and small flakes of April snow fell as the children boarded the bus just after 2 p.m. Because of scheduling, the return flight was from Buffalo, so the ride was a little longer. Kids drifted to sleep.

The roads, the airport terminal and the plane all looked and felt the same as the previous day's. But on the return flight, Charlie and his sister Anise, while watching cartoons on the mini-television, clutched Polaroids of themselves with their mother, new memories for home.

Once off the plane, Diana Archer called the trip's last head count before leading the group out of JFK and into the night. New York City was colder than the day before. The children of Albion gathered at the curb, waiting for a cab or a family member to pick them up—once again waiting.