

# Forgiven, not forgotten

North Carolina ministry seeks to build ties between prisoners and their children

by JAMIE DEAN in Maury, N.C.



**REUNITED:** A father at Maury prison greets his daughter

**A** LONG THE BACK ROADS OF EASTERN NORTH Carolina, the 1,500 residents of Maury barely outnumber the population of the tiny town's largest residential facility: the Maury Correctional Institution, a close-security prison holding nearly 1,000 men facing long, hard time. Just around a secluded bend, the prison's concrete walls and barbed wire tower over the surrounding acres of green fields brimming with short, leafy tobacco.

Even if inmates' families make the trek to Maury, visitation is a sterile affair: Inmates sit across from visitors at small, square tables, and rules are strict—one hug on arrival, one hug when leaving, and no other physical contact. The regulations are understandable: Many of these men are serving time for violent crimes, including murder. Whatever the crime, the sentences are often long, averaging 20 years to life.

None of that seems to bother Scottie Barnes. The founder of the Taylorsville, N.C.-based Forgiven Ministry—a Christian ministry for inmates and their families—is familiar with visiting days: Her father began spending long stretches of time in prison when Barnes was 4 years old. He died in a Kentucky jail when Barnes was 42. Her life-long desire to reconcile with her father happened after he embraced Christianity, shortly before his death.

Barnes hopes to narrow that gap for other children. That's why she's in a conference room at the Maury prison on a Thursday evening, training local volunteers for a program that will reunite a handful of inmates with their children for an entire day. The program—called One Day With God—is particularly striking at a prison like this one where visitation rules are tight. Officials have agreed to allow carefully selected inmates to interact with their children in ways they normally couldn't: playing games, holding hands, sharing a meal, making crafts, lots of hugs.

Over a small sound system, Barnes tells a dozen volunteers why organizing one day of interaction is worth so much effort: "Just because that daddy's behind these walls doesn't mean he's not a father."

That's a theme the ministry has repeated at more than 15 camps this year, serving more than 1,100 inmates, children, and caregivers. Barnes plans to conduct 14 more camps in five states before the end of the year with the help of two other full-time staff members, including her husband, Jack, and a cadre of unpaid board members and volunteers. Each place they visit, the message is the same: Be a responsible father. Ask God to help you do it.

The message extends to the ministry's other programs too: For example, an 18-week re-entry program led by volunteer mentors teaches life skills to inmates nearing the end of their sentences at minimum-security jails. Monthly Bible studies encourage inmates to stay connected to their children. Some programs cater specifically to children: Volunteers staff the ministry's Ezekiel Room at another prison, allowing children to hear Bible stories and interact with each other during otherwise long visits in confined quarters.





Scottie Barnes, Maury inmates/fathers at a Forgiven Ministries Bible study

But the ministry's centerpiece is the two-day camp at prisons, which usually begins like the weekend in Maury: On an early Friday morning, inmates—17 when I visited—in white T-shirts, tan pants, and white tennis shoes begin trickling into a windowless visitation room. Each man has one or more children he hopes will visit on Saturday. The prison chaplain and other officials have selected inmates who must meet certain criteria: no sex offenders or pedophiles; each participant must remain infraction-free for at least 90 days before the camp.

Barnes, assistant Karen Strickland, a Bible teacher, and a handful of volunteers spend Friday helping the fathers prepare. The day is mostly devoted to biblical teaching about fatherhood, with an emphasis on the gospel. The fathers prepare in other ways too as they gather around small tables set with white tablecloths and a cluster of gifts for each inmate: crackers, Moon Pies, peanuts, bottles of juice, a bar of soap, a toothbrush, a tract, a devotional book, and a Bible-based parenting booklet.

Before the teaching begins, Barnes tries to break the ice, but these dads are quiet. She finally asks: "How many of you are nervous?" Every hand goes up. Barnes pauses to pray for the men and then assures them: "Your kids aren't looking at you in any other way than as a daddy tomorrow."

The men line up at a long table for their first project: decorating wooden picture frames for their children. A photographer will snap a photo of each inmate and his child on Saturday, and the dads will give their children the hand-decorated frames to display the pictures. They'll also write a message on the back with a black pen.

Sheldon Sutton talks about his nervousness as he sticks a small, foam diamond and pink flower to the corners of a frame for his 8-year-old daughter. Sutton is serving a sentence of life without parole, and he hasn't seen his daughter in over a year: "I really don't know what to say to her." Mostly, he wants one thing: "I want her to leave knowing I love her."

In a box in the corner, the men stack the completed frames, bearing hand-written messages: "I wish I could be back in your life." "I miss you very much." "I look forward to our future together." "I think about you everyday." "Daddy loves you."

Barnes tells the men they'll make a small lamp with their child tomorrow. She asks, "How many of you have something you made with your daddy?" No one raises a hand. She follows up: "How many of you had a daddy who was in jail?" More than half raise their hands.

Barnes knows that these inmates' children face a similar danger: Children of prisoners are seven times as likely to end up in prison themselves. It's a sobering statistic for these fathers, and Barnes asks: "Do you want to break that cycle?" Heads nod hard around the room.

Haseem Everett especially wants to break the cycle. His daughter is 9 years old. He hasn't seen her in 6½ years. He's eager to encourage her to live a clean life: "I was running the streets at 13, and I refuse to let her get into that situation." He's also eager to begin a relationship with her. "If we can just start a foundation," he says. He confesses his biggest fear: "Her not coming."

That's a fear Barnes and her assistant, Strickland, share. After prison officials identify men for the camps, Barnes and Strickland send letters to each child's caregiver—usually a mother, grandmother, aunt, or other family member. They follow up with phone calls, often pleading with sometimes-wary family members to bring the children. By Friday afternoon, they're still calling families to confirm, and encouraging the inmates to place calls that evening too. Nothing is certain, they gently warn.

But the risk is worth it to these men, and they listen intently as Jim Williams of Blue Ridge Ministries presents a fathering seminar with practical instruction: Contact your children as often as possible. Encourage them to respect their caregivers.

**BELATED BIRTHDAY:**  
Families share lunch  
and celebrate birthdays  
they've missed



Maintain a relationship with Christ that informs your relationship with your kids.

By late afternoon, the men eat the last of their snacks—they can't take food back to their cells—and they file out for a long night of waiting.

Early Saturday morning, children and caregivers begin arriving at a nearby church. The ministry pairs a volunteer mentor with each family, and mentors will remain with their assigned child throughout the day. Caregivers stay at the church for a day-long program designed to encourage and support them.

Meanwhile, in the prison's gym, the dads blow up balloons and pace nervously. By 9:20 a.m. the children have arrived, and the prison goes on lockdown as they're escorted through the cold, gray corridors toward the gym. Dads crane their necks as volunteers introduce each child. Some run to their fathers. Others are more timid. Some shed tears.

Sutton is relieved to see his 8-year-old daughter approach with white beads decorating her pretty, braided hair. She offers a wide smile and big hug. In a separate corner, Everett isn't smiling: His daughter did not come, although she lives less than 30 miles away. "I'm just disappointed," he says, and so are four other men. But Everett says he's still glad he came, and he hopes to apply what he's learned about fatherhood as he's able.

For the others, a series of games, a magic show, and other fun activities allow dads to relax with their children, and begin to connect. For the first time in years, some hold their children on their laps. At a catered lunch of fried chicken in the visitation room, the conversations grow loud as fathers, children, and mentors chat over lunch. Since dads miss their children's birthdays, the ministry provides a birthday cake and everyone sings.

After lunch, the families make small lampshades by threading clear beads onto gold safety pins and closing them with wire. Each child will take home a small

**"I WANT HER TO LEAVE KNOWING I LOVE HER":**  
Sutton and his daughter



electric lamp that fits the shade. One child, Destiny, expresses her gratitude for time with her father: "I've never had a day like this in my life, and I may never have one again."

Darlyn White, the prison's administrator, says she's open to the ministry returning and says she hopes the men will keep in touch with their children. White believes in the Christian-based nature of the program and says her church donated \$1,700 toward covering the camp's cost. "We're not so naïve to think that every one of these men is going to change, but Jesus says He goes after the one lost sheep," says White. "These are our lost sheep—and if we can save one, we're going to do it."

The day winds down with quiet time for fathers to talk with their children, and with a balloon release in a tiny outdoor courtyard surrounded by towering walls. As the families watch the colorful balloons dot a blackening sky, some wipe away tears. In a few moments, the day will be over. The children will be gone.

The last few minutes are difficult, and some fathers cry harder than their children. Barnes and Williams gather the men to encourage them to build on what they've started today, and promise to pray for them. "I love every one of you," says Barnes. "You're my daddies at Maury now."

For Sutton, saying goodbye was hard, but the dad who initially wasn't sure what he'd say sent his daughter home with this handwritten message on the back of a frame holding a picture of the pair: "I give you my all/I am there to pick you up when you fall/In flesh or in spirit/In chains or free/I will love you forever/I will be a better me." 🌐

## Forgiven Ministry

► **First six months of 2009:**  
1,133 inmates, children, and families served at 14 camps;  
1,256 camp volunteers,  
most from local churches

► **Serves both men and women inmates**

► **Maintains "The Adams Center," a facility for families visiting inmates in area prisons**

► **Winner of Texas Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Award for "Best Family Program"**

► **2008 income: \$327,291**  
► **2008 expenses: \$298,530**