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Mothers of incarcerated share pain and hope

By **Mary Schmich**

The mothers are trading stories of visiting their sons.

“County’s horrific,” says Julie Anderson. “All you get is 15 minutes. Behind glass.”

That’s County as in Cook County Jail, where rules for visitors are strict.

“No sleeveless tops,” she says.

Timika Rutledge nods.

“Yeah,” says Rutledge, “nothing too short, nothing sheer. Man, I went through that with my son.”

The women lean into the table, over plates filled with cherries and muffins and ham, acting out how they talk to their children through the jailhouse glass.

Then they laugh. Sometimes, what else can you do?

Anderson and Rutledge are part of a unique sorority, mothers of the incarcerated, and they belong to a group that meets one Saturday a month at the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation on the South Side.

Up on the second floor of an old brick building that was once a Catholic school, the women gather for brunch, a peace circle and the company of others who understand things no one else does.

What it’s like to drive for hours several times a month, year after year, to see a child who’s locked up in a distant prison?

What it’s like to know your child will grow old in a cell?

What it’s like to try to keep your other kids from the same fate?

What it’s like to have an imprisoned child come home?

“I always said, ‘I don’t go in for therapy,’” says Anderson, whose son Eric, after 20 years of incarceration for murder, recently moved from the Menard Correctional Center to Cook County to wait for a new sentencing hearing. “I’m Irish Catholic. We don’t do therapy.”

But she does this.

“You learn it does help to talk about it.”

Three years ago, on one of her regular visits to prisoners at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, Sara Nunez looked around the waiting room.

“I noticed that there were a lot of sad, sad faces,” she says, “and lonely-looking moms.”

Nunez, a retired nurse, is part of Precious Blood’s “ministry of presence” at the juvenile center. No preaching. No Bible study. Just go, talk, listen, be.

In her visits, she had been moved by how many of the young men — boys, really — said, “I feel so bad for my mom.”

“When they realize that they are incarcerated, particularly if it’s a felony and it’s going to be long term,” she says, “they suddenly have these epiphanies. They feel bad that their moms are having to suffer because they’ll be sent away for a long time.”

Once in a while, a boy asks her, “Will you call my mom? Just let her talk?”

That day in the waiting room, it occurred to Nunez that it might be useful to bring some of the lonely-looking moms together to talk to each other.

Now the Precious Blood Center welcomes whoever shows up for the monthly meeting, some months half a dozen women, other months three times that many.

On this Saturday, they include Julie Anderson, whose son was arrested at the age of 15 for his part in the gang-related shooting deaths of two girls.

There’s Beatriz, whose son was convicted of aggravated criminal assault four years ago, shortly after he turned 16.

Gail is here. Her son worked in the Precious Blood yard until he was sent to juvenile detention on a probation violation.

The group has expanded to include a few women whose children have been murdered. One is Timika Rutledge, whose presence reminds the others that there are different ways to lose a child.

“I just love these women,” Rutledge says. “Listening to their stories, even though my son is gone, they helped me see some things.”

Rutledge has had a son in prison, but she comes to the meeting because of what happened to another son, Cornelius German, known as Cornbread. He was shot to death at the age of 15.

She credits the Precious Blood community for saving her.

“Before this happened,” says Rutledge, “I wasn’t thinking about nobody’s church. I was thinking, let me go smoke a little something. Now, I get down on my knees.”

Next to the brunch table, she drops to one knee in front of Julie Anderson.

“I love that you’re so honest,” Anderson says. “I like your hair today, by the way.”

“What are we doing to help our hearts?” Sara Nunez asks.



Top, Julie Anderson, center, whose son is in prison, shares stories with other women in the same situation during a once-a-month support group on June 20, 2015. Bottom, Sister Donna Liette, right, gives Gail Morris a glass of juice as she arrives at the Precious Blood Center last month. (Abel Uribe, Chicago Tribune)

Brunch is over. The mothers and three religious sisters have assembled in a ring of chairs for the peace circle.

Gail says she’s helping her heart by smiling more at strangers and telling them hello.

“Hello can take a person a long way,” she says.

Beatriz talks about how she switched careers after her son was incarcerated and now works as a translator in a hospital.

“At the hospital, I see really sad things you cannot change,” she tells the group. “When I started, people said, ‘Don’t do this. You are so sad right now.’ But, no, this is helping.”

This week’s group is small. Nunez tells the women that one of the regulars is sick, another has Crohn’s disease, another has a swollen knee.

“Some of you remember Veronica,” she says at one point. “Her son was incarcerated, then got out and then was killed in a car accident. She wanted me to greet all of you.”

For an hour, the women talk about life, about children and grandchildren, maladies, trying to find a job or an apartment, about sadness.

“I’m just grateful I woke up today,” says Olivia, who has come in late, noting that it takes a long time to get there on the bus from the West Side.

She mentions a grandson who was recently sent to boot camp instead of prison.

“I was so relieved,” she says. “He was so scared.”

“Well,” says Timika, “that’s good he was scared. Maybe he’ll rethink his lifestyle choices.”

As I sit and listen to the mothers of the incarcerated, I’m struck by the fact that the violence in Chicago comes at so many people from so many different angles, like bullets that endlessly ricochet.

The women in this room are just a few of the thousands struggling to keep their lives on course after something terrible happened to a child. It takes work, time, faith and the company of people who know what it’s like.

“Leaving the circle today,” Olivia tells the group, just before the Tibetan bells ring to signal the end of the session, “I’m kind of uplifted. Sometimes maybe I just need to move around and get out.”

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