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**Fathers,
Children
& Prison**

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Hundreds of sons and daughters, some of whom have never known their fathers, came to prison for a day to ignite and restore the bonds between father and child

Relationships fade and die in prison, especially those between parent and child. Many prisoners have children they never see, no matter how much they may want to. Or how much the children might want to. Angola, like most prisons, is hidden away in a remote, isolated location, far from where prisoners' families live. As most of them are poor, visiting is costly in both time and money. But on a historic September day, those realities were pushed aside. Children, brought by their mothers, grandparents or guardians, from across Louisiana and as far away as Florida came to spend a day with their imprisoned fathers. Smiles, laughter, some sad and happy tears—of child and father—and unpredictable moments filled the day.

It began when Angola Chaplain Supervisor Robert Toney heard of a speaking engagement at another Louisiana prison that featured Scottie Barnes of Forgiven Ministry Inc., a prison ministry in North Carolina. "I do 'One Day With God' prison camps that reunite children with their incarcerated parents," she told an inquiring Toney. Excited about the prospect, he went directly to Warden Burl Cain with the idea. Immediately recognizing the benefits, Cain told Toney, "I want it here, and it's going to be the biggest and the best."

Preparation took months, with a small army of Angola employees laboring beyond their normal scope of duties to make it work. Prisoners were notified. Those wishing to participate told their families and submitted the necessary paperwork. Some, who had lost contact through the years, relied on the Chaplains Department for help. Contacting families was the biggest problem because some phones were disconnected and inmates' contact information was outdated. Many times the Chaplains Department secretary, Frosty Day, used the Internet to find their relatives. About a third of the children had never visited their fathers in prison because of a lack of transportation. "A lot of them couldn't afford to come," she said, "but

In their father's house

By Ronald Walker

they agreed when they found out transportation would be provided."

Many calls were emotional. "A lot of people cried and expressed how wonderful it was to do something like this in prison," said Day. "Some children didn't know they had other brothers and sisters, even though a few went to the same schools in the same cities. This gave them the chance to meet each other." One father had two children the same age by different mothers, she said. "They didn't even know they were related."

Anyone coming into the prison—for security reasons—must undergo a security clearance. That task fell to the classification department. They were responsible for screening and verifying children's ages. "The Chaplains Department supplied us with names of the children and mothers," said Larry Calvert, director of classification, "and we were happy to assist them. We also made sure the families weren't victims of the father."

In early September, Scottie Barnes met with more than 250 men at the Camp-D Chapel. A few days later, Barnes, along with her family, more than 60 volunteers from her Forgiven Ministries in North Carolina, and leaders from Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM), assembled in the rodeo arena to prepare for the reunion. "We've received blessings already and the program hasn't even started yet," she said. Sharing what she knew about Angola, Barnes told the crowd about the annual rodeos, the inmate self-help programs, and the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS), where prisoners can earn degrees in theology.

"If someone had asked me about ministering in prison five or six years ago, I would've laughed in their face," said Ron Meadows, a Christian recording artist, a bus company owner and a platform artist for Operation Starting Line (OSL), who sang "Mary Had A Little Lamb," with the catch phrase, "and Jesus was His Name." Meadows sang on the *Lion King* movie soundtrack and has worked with many celebrities, including Michael Jackson and Elton John. "But none of that means anything," he said, "if you haven't given your heart to Jesus Christ."

Everyone was thrilled about bringing the reunion event to Angola, now just a sunrise away. "We're on a mission," said Michael Smith, prison chaplain administrator for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and Ministry Leadership Team leader for PFM in North Carolina. "This mission didn't start with us coming to Angola. It started on a hill far away, on an old rugged cross." The mission, he said, involves reaching, reconciling and restoring relationships between children and fathers. "It calls the church to reach from behind the walls of a building, to reach from past feelings, and to reach out to prisons and the needs of our society. It's sad that





JERAILL & KINYSHIA HARDY



BARNES: "CHILDREN JUST NEED LOVE"



A QUIET MOMENT

many religious bodies simply won't take the initiative to reach out. What better place to reach out to than prisons?

"As we reach out to the kids and fathers tomorrow, we'll encounter some hostility and resentment," said Smith, explaining that incarceration causes children and fathers to lose contact, and many don't know how to communicate with each other. "Restoring those relationships is the ultimate phase of this mission, because it's natural for child and father to love each other. That's what this is all about. Let's fulfill God's mission in Angola tomorrow."

The following day, a Saturday, more than 500 children and about 250 prisoners took part in an Angola first—the "One Day With God" reunion of incarcerated fathers with their children. On hand to help make this milestone event a success were nearly 250 volunteers from PFM, Awana (a Christian group that ministers and mentors to children), the Catholic Church, Child Evangelism Fellowship, the First Baptist Church of Slidell, Louisiana, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church of New Orleans, and Glen Oaks Baptist Church and the Judson Baptist Association, both of Baton Rouge.

No one, particularly prisoner dads, imagined an event of such magnitude ever happening, but it did. Sitting in rodeo bleachers, they nervously anticipated the children's arrival. Some wondered aloud if their

child would even come. Then they appeared. One by one, each child walked into the arena as their names were announced over a loudspeaker. Excited fathers ran as fast as they could, hugging and kissing them, and grinning from ear to ear. T-shirts of matching color (either blue, green, maroon, purple, red, turquoise or yellow) with "One Day With God" emblazoned on the back, were given to each family group, signifying their bond.

Many children were thrilled to see their fathers, and even happier about spending a whole day with them. But for others it took a little time. Some were awkward and ill at ease because they hadn't seen each other in years, and some were too young to remember their father before he went to prison. All had many questions only a father could answer.

Chaperons—assigned to each family—accompanied them everywhere, acting as mediator and counselor, and insuring that amiability prevailed. "Bringing kids together with their dads is a great thing," said Sandra Smith, a volunteer. She and her husband David are members of the First Baptist Church of Slidell. "This has been wonderful," she said. "The dads really enjoy seeing their kids."

Their mothers and guardians, meanwhile, spent the day at the Angola Training Academy where they listened to several prisoners speak about the different laws affecting them, some simple truths about prison, crime, and system, and how they could help

by lobbying their representatives for change in certain overly harsh laws. Urged to mingle and get acquainted, many exchanged phone numbers and agreed to participate in budding support groups.

The rodeo grounds were dressed out to resemble a festival midway. Fathers and children strolled the spacious area and participated in assorted contests, games and rides. Some picked teams and competed on a basketball court. Joining in on the fun, some girls played a few games. Winners celebrated their victories with high fives and triumphant shouts. Another popular event was tug-of-war. Dust flew everywhere as teams tugged on thick ropes, straining for an advantage. They cheered and laughed regardless of the outcome.

Smaller kids, full of energy, ran everywhere. Shouting and waving their arms, they jumped on a gigantic inflatable slide, took horse rides, crushed aluminum cans with a large mallet, tried their hand at miniature golf, threw frisbees, and played in other games. They had fun, to put it mildly. Some even had their faces painted and strutted around with long, colorful balloons wrapped around their heads. Another crowd pleaser was the chance to dunk an inmate in a big tub of water. Just throw a baseball and hit the bullseye. It was a bright, happy day, and the brightest, happiest moments were the bonding of fathers with their children.

Prisoners and children all seemed to consider the day a blessing. Not only did it give them a chance to renew or strengthen family ties, it gave prisoner dads the opportunity to advise their children about life's obstacles and the importance of making the right decisions. For some it was the first chance to explain why they were in prison and to try to steer their children from the petty mistakes that led to Angola.

"Today could change the whole course of a child," said Scottie Barnes, who started going into prisons ten years ago. Her quest to bring children to their incarcerated parents began in the Philippines, where she reunited a little boy in an orphanage with his father in prison. That vision wouldn't

let her rest until she was able to reunite many more children with parents behind bars. "I thank God these children know their dad cares today," she said. "They don't have to hurt anymore wondering if their father loves them."

Some volunteers appeared to enjoy the day more than the families. "I love seeing the cheerful and excited looks on the children's faces!" said John Banks, national director of Angel Tree, a ministry designed to engage, encourage and equip churches to help the children of prisoners. Some churches provide gifts at Christmas. Others send kids to summer camps or provide individual mentors. "What has happened to this point was focused on the children, but now we're connecting the children with their prison parents. That's why this event is so important."

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Winding down from the morning's activities, dads, children and volunteers assembled under the new acre-sized steel awning covering part of the rodeo hobbycraft area. At every table was an unassembled candle-like electric lamp in a plastic bag. Barnes told each child to assemble it with their father's help. Pondering over which piece went where, kids slowly put the lamps together. Fathers provided minor assistance, if any, but beamed with delight. Finishing up, each child brought their lamp to Barnes, who congratulated them and announced their names over the microphone. Afterward, everyone munched on hamburgers, hot dogs, chips and sodas.

"We're here because we love you, and to let you know that you can be anything in life that you choose to be," said Ron Meadows, after everyone was seated in the rodeo bleachers. "You believe that?" he asked. "Yes!" shouted the kids. Leslie Kent, national director for OSL platform artists, recording artist, and one who has smuggled Bibles