



JyJuan Brock has been in and out of the criminal justice system several times during his young life and is currently incarcerated. But his family has happier memories of him, such as this vacation photo.

From Pittsburgh, traveling a winding Route 43 southbound to the Mon-Fayette Expressway, you'll arrive at State Correctional Institution at Fayette in a little over an hour, if traffic is forgiving. The men's facility has been the closest state prison to the city since 2017, when the 22-acre SCI Pittsburgh barracks was shuttered.

Visiting incarcerated women is even more challenging. SCI Cambridge Springs, a repurposed college campus housing 1,223 women as of August, is an hour-and-41-minute drive from Pittsburgh. SCI Muncy, the former Industrial School for Women, is more than three hours north.

If separation is a debt owed and paid by the incarcerated, distance is the subprime interest that hits families and partners when they're struggling most to keep their heads above water. The consequences of separation and distance manifest in trauma and loss on both sides of the bars.

An August study by the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy indicates that young people with incarcerated parents have higher instances of "anxiety disorder, having a felony charge, spending time in jail, not completing high school, becoming a parent when younger than 18 years and being socially isolated." A survey by the criminal justice reform collective FWD.us revealed that 32% of female respondents lost their household's primary source of income when their partner was incarcerated, and 35% experienced homelessness or housing insecurity in their absence.

"[The effects] are different for various age groups," said Anna Hollis, executive director of Amachi Pittsburgh, a Heinz Endowments-supported

mentorship organization designed to aid children with incarcerated parents. "When kids are young, oftentimes they witness the arrest of their parent. They may be with the custodial parent through trial and sentencing, and they get exposed to the course of the criminal justice system. It leaves them with so much confusion, pain and emotional stress that they internalize. Oftentimes families don't talk about it because they don't know how to talk about it."

As children get older, Ms. Hollis explained, they can become hardened and angrier and more frustrated as new challenges surface. They may have difficulty concentrating in school, and may not be able to call on a parent to work through issues such as bullying or to provide support during school activities or meetings with teachers.

"There are behavioral health issues, not only with kids, but also with custodial parents," she added. "The financial and emotional stress of just trying to hold it together for yourself and your family can lead to conflict between the custodial parent and the kid."

"Parents have feelings of resentment, and the kids are resentful of what has happened. That can lead to deterioration of family functioning or increased family dysfunction. We really have to be attuned to what's happening with our families and be responsive."

Despite the many challenges, there are families that make progress in recovering from the impact of having a loved one incarcerated. Here are two stories of families who experienced the heartache and setbacks of incarceration, and are moving forward with their lives, even though struggles continue.

more than distant relatives

When someone is incarcerated, the impact of the separation on family members can be heartbreaking. It takes determination to grab onto opportunities for hope and healing, but some families are doing just that. By Deborah Todd



Joshua Franzos

Angela Brock misses her son JyJuan, who is incarcerated, but she is holding onto hope that the end of his time away from home is in sight.

The Hill District home occupied by Angela Brock and her two sons in the 1980s was surrounded by noise. Any given moment on Whiteside Road featured bass thrumming from a passing car; echoes of debates that could turn hostile on a dime; fights, gunshots and the inevitable sirens.

Inside was no sanctuary. Angela and her partner were in the throes of crack cocaine addiction, and he was verbally and physically abusive to her and her oldest son, JyJuan. The chaos continued until the mid-'90s, when Angela entered a recovery program and committed to changing her life.

Today, in her 26th year of recovery, Angela lives in a one-bedroom loft roughly a 10-minute walk from her old home. Every morning, sunlight from floor-to-ceiling windows floods through the open space as far back as the bedroom. The most common background noise is the humming of bus engines and chatter from commuters.

Angela's environment and circumstances have improved, but repercussions of the past reverberate throughout the family's lives. JyJuan, 32, has been in and out of the criminal justice system since his senior year of high school, when he sold marijuana to obtain money in anticipation of the birth of his first son.

That period marked a shift in JyJuan's mood, behavior and reactions to stress that would send him to jail off and on for the next few decades. At the start of 2018, he saw a psychiatrist and was, for the first time, given an official diagnosis.

"He was suffering from PTSD, depression and anxiety. And every time he put a mood-altering drug into his body he got [arrested]," Angela explained.

In June of last year, JyJuan was arrested following an altercation with his girlfriend's stepfather and sent to the Allegheny County Jail. Despite the diagnoses, it took two months of daily calls before he was seen by a mental health professional and put on medication.

"I was constantly calling, saying he needs some kind of evaluation, he needs to get on some kind of meds to take the edge off. I kept calling, and calling, and calling. I never gave up. My son ain't gon' commit suicide," Angela said.

JyJuan's story is no anomaly. According to a study on behavioral health services in the Allegheny County Jail, an estimated 17% of prisoners nationally struggle with mental illness, and 59% of that group also have substance abuse issues.

Conducted in 2014 by the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, the analysis found that jail policies were in line with best practices for behavioral health services in a correctional setting. Even so, the study revealed "a lack of consistency" in intake procedures and criteria for placement into mental health units and programs and a lack of available services to meet the demand. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that at least 83% of jail inmates with mental illness don't gain access to treatment while on the inside.

For JyJuan, getting the right medication was the difference between praying to die and fighting for his life. After he was transferred to the Indiana County Jail last year and put on a cocktail specific to his symptoms, his world opened.

Conversations with Angela shifted from fatalism and ways she could plead his case from the outside to hope and ways he could advocate from the inside.

He started journaling to channel emotions, and a process Angela called "unbelievable" unfolded. A collection of poems became a full-length anthology. Letters to attorneys and legal experts inspired enrollment into introductory criminal justice classes and hours in the jail's law library researching reform efforts.

In December 2018, he saw an article discussing the Endowments' criminal justice reform initiative, and wrote a letter to Carmen Anderson, director of Equity and Social Justice at the foundation, to offer assistance. Since that time, he published "Poetry Behind the Wall" on Amazon with Angela's help and Ms. Anderson's encouragement, and has used his story to mentor young men in the jail with similar struggles.

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The connection to the Endowments also inspired Angela to grow in advocacy. Today, she is the organizer of Pittsburgh Moms on the Move, a group of women affected by the justice system. The group gathers once a month to vent, discuss strategies for navigating the system, and strategize ways to promote prison reform.

“The group shares invaluable, firsthand perspectives about the system that help inform how we consider targeted issues,” Ms. Anderson said.

Angela described the group as a cluster of “very strong personalities” that come together in support during critical moments but lash out at each other occasionally. But she’s more patient with their frustrations these days, particularly since the end of hers appears to be in sight.

In November, JyJuan was sentenced to 70 months in federal prison—minus the year and a half already served in jail—for an incident in which contraband was found in his cell. He also was transferred to the Allegheny County Jail to await another sentencing in January for last year’s altercation with his girlfriend’s stepfather, and is expecting the prosecution to offer him probation. If all goes well, this would mean JyJuan could be home in a little over four years.

“I don’t take [the disputes in the mothers’ group] personal,” Angela said. “I know how it feels not knowing when you’ll see your child again. One woman couldn’t even get a visit with her son.

“I’ve got some gratitude. My son’s got a [release] date.”

Last year, Nieshia Duganne, her four children and her mother moved into a six-bedroom red brick split-level with a covered porch. The house, nestled on a sunny hilltop in a south Pittsburgh neighborhood, was the second they had rented in the area in less than a year and the fourth they had lived in together since Nieshia was released from SCI Muncy in 2016.

Before then, Nieshia’s only son, Divine Johnson, 15, and her daughter Lanata Johnson, 20, hadn’t lived with their two sisters regularly since all four were placed in different homes through Blair County Children, Youth and Families Services more than a decade ago. Eighteen-year-old Lakyla and 17-year-old Teona Johnson lived together off and on throughout the years, but were separated after conflicts with or traumas inflicted by caregivers.

Settling into the new rental as a unified family was as easy as finding space for everyone to sleep and fitting a large, plush sectional sofa into the snug living room. Settling into a dynamic that hasn’t existed since 2008 is still a work in progress.

“I didn’t know who Lakyla was, to be honest,” said Divine.

“I didn’t know none of them, for real,” Nieshia acknowledged.

Her family’s saga of separation and heartache began in October 2008, when Nieshia’s mother, Lisa Whitehead, was arrested by a federal task force for connections to a drug ring accused of trafficking an estimated \$1.5 million in heroin and

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Nieshia Duganne





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After being separated from her children while incarcerated, Nieshia Duganne, center, enjoys having the family together. Behind her are her children Lakyla Johnson, left, and Divine Johnson, right; on the front left is Teona Johnson and on the right front is Lanata Johnson.

crack cocaine into Blair County. Nieshia, who lived in the home, was arrested on charges of harboring a fugitive and obstruction of justice.

She posted bail and returned home after 10 months. But that was more than enough time for the children to see the foster care system at its worst.

Teona called their first home, a rural cottage in the woods miles from Aliquippa, “terrible.” She contended that she and her brother endured an abusive environment in which her hair was pulled out and Divine was locked in the basement on occasions when he was just 3.

Nieshia said that during court appearances, she told judges she saw signs of abuse, but to no avail.

“Nobody cared what was going on with my children while they were in foster care,” she recalled. “So, I signed my parental rights over to my father and his wife at the time. I never wanted my children to have to go through that again.”

In May 2011, Nieshia pleaded guilty to federal drug charges related to her role in the drug operation involving her mother and was sentenced to serve a maximum of 10 years in prison with a minimum five years of probation. Around that time, her children’s father, Akil Johnson, was sentenced to 48 to 98 years for leading a separate drug syndicate.

Divine moved in with Akil Johnson’s father in Norristown, which proved to be a stable home. That wasn’t the case for his sisters, however, who bounced around from relative to relative and described some of their experiences as traumatic.

By the time Niesha was released in 2016, Lakyla was with family in Philadelphia, Lanata was placed in the New Academy Charter School in Butler by a juvenile court judge, and Teona was living with relatives in Homestead. Divine was still in Norristown.

Now that the family has been reunited, conversations range from careful and awkward to a surge of emotions that seem to have been waiting to be expressed for a decade. To bridge the gaps, Nieshia reached out to Amachi Pittsburgh.

Some of the children were connected to mentors, but Teona’s mentor, a black female lawyer who has helped both mother and daughter navigate criminal cases, holds a special place in the family.

“She’s very good with chastising in a friendly way and making sure [Teona] has whatever support she’ll need going forward,” Nieshia said.

“She’s everything I want to be,” said Teona, her wide, brown eyes brightening as she talked about her mentor.

Amachi’s Anna Hollis said the relationship works because all parties are committed to an approach that goes beyond one-on-one mentorship.

“There are complex challenges affecting these families that extend beyond the capacity of mentoring as a strategy,” she explained. “It’s important to pay attention to how what is being presented in the home and what is being presented in the community can impact mentoring outcomes.”

The challenges facing the family are far from minor. They had lived in the borough of Homestead for a while but moved after an incident during which someone shot at Teona but missed, and the family home was vandalized.

Nieshia had to adjust to treating children she left as babies like the young adults and teenagers they are today. Her children are figuring out how to relate to Nieshia as a mother instead of a stranger.

But for the first time in years, they can vent a buildup of frustrations directly to each other during unfiltered family meetings. They can go on impromptu missions to feed the homeless or to hike local trails. They can write their own rules for reunification, even if they’re hard to understand from the outside looking in.

“[Our neighbors] don’t understand us,” said Niesha, explaining the aftermath of an indoor snowball fight they had not long after her release.

“They were like, ‘You’re throwing snowballs in the house!’ But this was our first winter. I didn’t give a damn if we were in the house. It was the first snow, and we were going to have fun and we did.”

And like other families rising out of the chaos of incarceration, they also were pulling their lives together with the expectation of a better future. **h**