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UNH Program Connects Families in Prison

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Editors Note:

Both James Cowan Jr. and Richard Eck have been released from the Lakes Region Correctional Facility since this story was written.

DURHAM, N.H. -- James Cowan Jr., 22, was serving an 18-month prison term for illegal possession of a narcotic. A reserved young man with close-cut hair and schoolboy good looks, he could be anyone's son or brother. But he's also a father. His baby was just 10 days old when Cowan was sentenced to the Lakes Region Correctional Facility.

A year-and-a-half is a long time for father and son to be separated. Locked behind the razor-wire fence of the Laconia facility, Cowan was likely to emerge from prison with little idea of his role as a parent, if not for a new program that pairs the University of New Hampshire with the Department of Corrections.

The Family Connections Project

Cowan was one of 80 out of 540 inmates at the correctional facility taking part in the Family Connections Project. A unique partnership among UNH's Department of Family Studies, the University's Cooperative Extension Family and Youth Development program, and the N.H. Department of Corrections, the project was created to help fill a gap in the corrections field -- helping families. A three-year grant from the N.H. Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Recovery (DAPR) further supports the program.

That DAPR is providing funding for the project makes good sense. The Lakes Region Correctional Facility serves nonviolent offenders and the majority, approximately 85 percent, committed crimes associated with drug and alcohol use. Nationally, drug and alcohol abuse and addiction are implicated in the incarceration of 80 percent, or 1.4 million of today's inmates, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. The children of these inmates are at risk for depression, dropping out of school, drug and alcohol abuse, and for following in

their parents' footsteps. There are approximately 300 children with incarcerated parents at the Lakes Region Correctional Facility.

"Although the facility provided a progressive model for rehabilitation, our programming did not adequately address family issues," said Warden John Sanfilippo. In 1997, Kristine Baber and Kerry Kazura, family studies faculty members, and Mary Temke, UNH Cooperative Extension, suggested the project to Sanfilippo. He saw a perfect opportunity to create a partnership.

"Research shows that family support for inmates during incarceration reduces the likelihood of recidivism," said Temke. "It also helps their children."

Assessing the Need

Kazura said the inmates' needs focused on three themes: family support and education programs; the importance of improved visitation environments and opportunities; and the value of educating families about the rehabilitation process and facility policies. They also suggested family support groups on the outside, staff training, and the availability of counseling services.

Getting the program off the ground, however, did not come without some controversy. Correctional officers "had some very valid concerns," Kazura said. "There was worry over security issues and the introduction of contraband. Some also felt the program might conflict with the inmates' need to focus on rehabilitation. Contact with family members might result in an inmate worrying about problems at home and not concentrating on his or own anger management or substance abuse."

The Family Connections staff aims to show that supporting successful family relationships will have a long-term impact on inmates' ability to succeed in life outside prison walls.

A New Resource Center

To establish the program Sanfilippo and the UNH educators wanted, a "new" family-friendly facility was necessary. The Department of Corrections renovated a wing of the building at the correctional facility to house a Family Resource Center, equipped with offices, a children's playroom, "living room," resource library and educational facilities. Inmates painted colorful murals and provided original art to make the center feel more like home.

In addition to providing a "home" for the program Sanfilippo, on the recommendation of Temke and Kazura, hired Kristina Toth, a 1991 UNH graduate, to be the program's administrator. Toth is responsible for coordinating the programs and working with county Cooperative Extension educators to link families to services and resources in their communities.

"In classes, parents learn about child growth and development, effective discipline, and positive communication," said Toth. "They learn about supporting their child's education, and they're taught how to help their children develop problem-solving and decision-making skills."

The project builds on the parenting curriculum, which was developed by Temke, adding support groups and structured one-on-one visits between the incarcerated parent and his or her child. These visits are separate from the mass family visits that take place in the prison's cafeteria each weekend. Feedback on parenting skills is given based on observations of the inmate's interaction with his or her child during visits. There is also an evaluation and research component.

"Our program is unique nationally because this expanded curriculum is combined with research and because of our partnership with the state's Department of Corrections and Cooperative Extension and UNH's Department of Family Studies," said Kazura. "Currently, there is little understanding about the impact of parental incarceration on children and their families. We're interested in finding out what factors might mitigate the negative effects of incarceration, contribute to healthy families, and reduce the risk of children getting involved with drugs, alcohol, and other criminal activity."

Educating Better Fathers

Most of the inmates at the Lakes Region Correctional Facility are like Cowan, between 20 and 30 years old and male, and have young children at home. Most have little parenting experience. Those involved in the Family Connections Project are eager to learn.

"I was in this program because I want to be a good parent," said Cowan. "He's my first child and I want to raise him the right way. I learned that I play an important role in my son's life."

Fathers' roles in children's lives is a focus of Kazura's research. She's long been interested in the effects of father-child bonding, and says the parenting role of fathers has often been ignored.

"There's been little attention on the importance of fathering in our society," said Kazura. "When people see parenting classes, they assume it's the mothers who are attending. Since there are only 40 women in the prison, most of our participants are men. I'm particularly interested in the unique aspects of fathering, and how they support their children's development."

During a recent visit interview at the Lakes Region Correctional Facility, Richard Eck, who was serving time for selling marijuana, spoke about his impending release, and what the Family Connections Project has meant to him.

"I'm a good father, but there is always room to improve," said Eck, who has three children ages seven-years, 19- and eight-months. "I had pretty set ideas about parenting before I came into this program. Now, I know how important it is to listen and to think through different ways to deal with things. Parenting classes are beneficial to everyone -- not just to those in prison. No matter how good you are, you can always be better if you want the best possible life for your kids."

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