

Justin Burl, holding a photograph of himself with his father and twin brother

# My Dad Is in Prison

**2.7 MILLION** AMERICAN KIDS HAVE A PARENT BEHIND BARS. JUSTIN, 15, IS ONE OF THEM.

BY JUSTIN BURL, as told to MARY KATE FRANK



HEATHER WESTON



**AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:**  
How does incarceration affect families?

**M**y favorite thing to do is play basketball. Before a game, I picture myself scoring, my team winning, and the crowd cheering. But then another thought enters my mind: *If only my pops were here . . .*

My dad has never seen me play ball. He's never helped me study for a test or even just sat on the couch and watched TV with me. For my entire life, my dad has been **incarcerated**. Right now, he's at Five Points Correctional Facility in Romulus, New York. That's almost 300 miles—or six hours—away from my home in Brooklyn. Unless he gets an early release, he will be there until 2021.

My dad calls, and we write letters back and forth, but it's just not the same as having him here to talk to every day. In fact, I get to travel there to see him in person only twice a year.

Saying goodbye is always the worst. No kid should have to do that. Parents are supposed to be with you all the time.

### Visiting Prison

In a lot of ways, my life is pretty normal. I have a **fraternal** twin brother named Jamaill. (He's five hours older than I am, but I think I am more mature.) We live with my grandma, who has raised us since we were babies, and we have a cat

Justin (center) with his brother and grandmother, in their home in Brooklyn

named T and three turtles.

When I get the chance to see my dad, I'm so happy—but going to the prison can be scary. The building is huge, with fences and wire around it. And as I go in, I have to take off my sneakers and go through a metal detector, kind of like airport security.

At the beginning and end of the visit, I can hug my dad, but other than that, we're not allowed to touch. The guards are always watching us, and that's frustrating. I wish we could be alone.

Jamaill and I stay as long as we're allowed—about five hours.



HEATHER WESTON (ALL IMAGES)

We sit at a long table and talk about sports, school, and our family. We laugh a lot and take photos. We also play games. My dad beats me at chess, but I'm the Connect Four champ.

### My Support System

After I leave my dad, I don't feel right. When I'm in that mood, I usually take a walk. Even just walking to the mailbox helps relieve my anger, or sometimes I go to the Y to swim or work out. I also spend time at the Osborne Association. They help people like me



“At the end of the day, you don't know what other people are going through, so you should never tease them. Instead, show you care by listening.”

—JUSTIN BURL

**Above:** Mr. Cortez from the Osborne Association is a role model and important friend in Justin's life. **Left:** Basketball is one of Justin's favorite activities. He dreams of playing professionally one day.

who have a family member who is incarcerated.

Jamaill and I have been going to Osborne for most of our lives, so the people there feel like family. They take me to visit my dad and help me stay out of trouble.

The staffer I am closest to is named Cortez, but I call him Mr. Cortez. I can talk to him about anything. Recently, a kid at school wanted to fight my friend, but I convinced everyone to sit down and talk instead—and it worked. Now we're all friends. When I told Mr. Cortez, he was so proud of me.

### The Best Day Ever

Sometimes, I imagine the day

my dad will come home. It will be the happiest day of my life. He loves hot wings, so maybe we will go to a wing place. I'll tell him, "Order whatever you want!"

But for now, I just keep in mind the advice my dad gives me. He says: "Keep your head up. Don't go down the wrong path like I did. Make me proud."

And that's exactly what I am going to do. ●



# When a Parent Goes to Prison

How one organization is helping children and their incarcerated parents stay connected

**S**cope editor Mackenzie Carro recently spoke with Liz Gaynes, president and CEO of an amazing organization called the Osborne Association. Gaynes and her team work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people—and with their children and families.

## How did your work with kids start?

My children's father, from whom I was separated at the time, went to prison, and there was nothing available to help my kids deal with the impact or any system for their father to participate in their lives in a **meaningful** way. So that's the first thing I did when I started working at Osborne in the 1980s.

## What challenges do these kids face?

There is a lot of shame and **stigma**. They worry about how they will be judged. After my 6-year-old told her friends her father was in prison, some started canceling

playdates. Another challenge is that they feel anger toward their parent for putting them in that situation. We also see kids blaming themselves. They feel like, "If I hadn't asked for a bike, he wouldn't have stolen anything, so it's my fault."

## How do you help?

We encourage incarcerated parents to write and call and stay connected. Our programs also connect kids in similar circumstances. When they are around other kids with the same

## Why is this work so important?

It gives young people and their parents an opportunity to make, mend, and maintain their relationships with each other. This translates into children feeling less isolated. Also, 95 percent of people in prison are coming home [at some point]. Being able to **sustain** the relationship during incarceration will have a big positive effect when parents come home and aren't just sort of arriving from Mars, having been gone for 10 years.



The Osborne Association is named for Thomas Mott Osborne (1859–1926). He was a famous prison reformer.

## How does your work fit with Thomas Mott Osborne's original vision?

Most people see prison as this isolated atom that's not connected to the world. Osborne's assumption about prisons, which was **revolutionary** at the time, was that you were preparing people to return to their families. He saw people in the context of their families. ●

## WRITING CONTEST

What is the Osborne Association? Why are its services necessary and valuable? Answer this question in a short essay. Support your ideas with details from both texts. Send your essay to **JUSTIN CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Zebra Forest* by Adina Rische Gewirtz.

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