

Sunday Morning

Zoe W., California

What do we really know about our students? What do we know about their lives between the time we send them off to do their homework and when they return and we greet them each day? How do we find out? How does what we know impact our expectations of them... or the strategies we use to support their reaching our expectations? What expectations do our students have of themselves; to what extent do we assume – or interpret that their expectations are different?

The following piece from high school senior Zoe W. offers insight into her life- a life that we as teachers and mentors can learn a great deal from, if we have the courage to make the connection.

- Greg Peters, California

Every Sunday morning I would wake up to a fresh glass of ripe orange juice, that tasted so sweet, but I never could quite keep down. Tension knotted in the depths of my stomach; anxiety made me shake. An interesting mixture of nervousness and excitement flowed through my pulsating veins as I stepped into the back seat of our silver/gray beat-up Toyota. We whizzed past the dead brown stench of dried hills that were covered completely with black and white cows blurred in my sleepy eyes, followed by the heat of still air as we sat in traffic for what must have been hours. We drove through an army base, a training camp that existed right across the street from my destination... my mother. My mother was hidden behind the barbed wire, metal detectors, cold steel, shackles and clanking chains that kept her inside this place, prison. As my dad and I pulled up to the front gates on those Sunday mornings, my child body became restless.

I remember form after form to fill out, line after line to wait in. The processing room to get into the prison visiting room was filled with antsy families, some from as far away as other countries. Little children anxiously ran around- their parents yelled at for not keeping them under control. There were the teary-eyed folks who had been sent home because they didn't follow the dress code perfectly, or for whatever other reasons the guards decided they needed to send someone home that day.

...confirmation that this child was not smuggling drugs into the prison,
...more metal detectors
...even more forms to fill out
...waiting in even more lines.

This took up a good portion of the morning before finally we were escorted by multiple guards watching us like hungry vultures, ready to swoop down at any moment to the visiting room...more waiting.

Staring at those thick beige doors, desperately hoping that every time the red light came on, my mom would be the one to walk out. Eventually, she would, but each time I stood there waiting, I feared that she would never come out to see me again. She quickly walked through the doors, standing tall at five foot even. Her short, dyed-red hair bobbing at her shoulders, and kind face, immediately put me at ease. I remember rushing across the room to get to her, and holding on so tight I thought I'd never let go. That is until a guard came along, staring us down, his eyes working like pliers, determined to pull us apart.

Those visits flew by quickly; I can hardly recall the time we actually spent together. I do remember just wanting to sit there and talk forever, wanting her to know what my life was like, and also the curiosity in my head of what it must be like for her to be stuck in this place, but I never got around to those questions. I was too scared to know. I didn't want to think about what she was going through, so I left it up to my imagination. Still, the questions stayed in my mind:

"What was prison like?"

"How did they treat her?"

"How did she survive here?"

I didn't want to make our only time together depressing, so I just avoided asking the questions. Instead, I would tell her about school, about my teachers and my friends. Her smooth voice and calming tone made me feel like I was back at home, just for a moment. She knew how to make me giggle and laugh, making the experience of visiting my mother in prison as enjoyable as it possibly could be. She would tell jokes and tickle me (only she knew my most ticklish spots).

Occasionally I brought my best friend with me to visit my mom, so I could bring the different parts of my life together in that same beige visiting room. I was never ashamed that my mom was in prison. I was more proud than anything

else, because I could show people that no matter what she's done in her past, she's still my mom. I felt the need to teach people that being incarcerated doesn't make you a bad person. Whether you are guilty or not, prisoners are still human beings, just like anyone else. My mom was my mom no matter what, and her incarceration never changed that. I was proud that she stood up for herself, that she didn't let the prison environment become an excuse to be depressed. She never let them take her spirit; this always amazed me.

That visiting room holds so many of my childhood memories; a part of me grew up there. I recall the first time a guard yelled at me. I was four years old and I'd gone over to say hello to another prisoner - a friend of my mom's who I also had known. Of course, this type of behavior is "unacceptable" in the visiting room because you may only have any form of contact with the inmate you signed up to visit. How was a four-year-old supposed to understand this? How was I to comprehend that I was not allowed to say hello to someone I know? In that experience I learned to fear guards and police officers, and eventually to hate them. I grew up being scared of the people in uniform who I had to be around every weekend.

I also spent a considerable amount of time without my mom in the visiting room. I would go to the kids' play area, where she wasn't allowed, and play with other kids while my parents had their visit. I drew pictures and played with toys. Some of the older girls used to braid my hair, and we would all just try and make the best of the situation. Knowing we all had something in common made it easier. There was no awkward period to get over the question of where your parents

were. Occasionally, there would be someone directing an arts and crafts project. While this was fun for me, I often sat there staring through the window, back out at my mom. All I longed for was to be by her side.

With my mom, we talked, we laughed, we cried, until it was time to say goodbye. Saying goodbye to my mom was the one thing I swore I would never be able to do again, yet every week I was forced to. During those goodbyes, when everyone got quiet, the mothers' tears slid down their cheeks, mirroring their sobbing children. I would hold on to my mom for as long as possible. We repeated "I love you" and "goodbye" to each other.

Even today, going back to that visiting room makes my eyes tear up watching other children desperately clinging to their mothers, just how I used to. Each time I would leave her with the strongest of hope in the depths of my heart that this would not be the last time I said goodbye to her. Leaving my mom was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, yet it was the only option I had.

I wanted so much to take her home with me, to show her my room, my school, my friends, my life. Every time I had a chance to blow out birthday candles or to make a wish in a fountain, it was for my mom to come home with me. All I desired was for that missing piece to be filled in, for her to be able to complete my puzzle. But she couldn't. This is why I will never forget those Sunday morning visits, my one chance to be a part of her life. ■

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