

# Family Preservation Project restoration an act of justice

It was the little things that meant so much, Nova Sweet recalls. All the little things mothers who aren't in prison take for granted.

"They would let me have a hairbrush and a comb. I could groom her when she came here," Sweet says ecstatically of those weekly visits with her young daughter. "Everything you got to do with your kids in the real world, you got to do with them for three hours – from the nervousness of 'hello' to playing games to helping with school work. It was major."

Sweet says it was while she was in the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility that she learned to be a mom. A lesson that would have been lost, she says, if it hadn't been for the Family Preservation Project that helps mothers like Sweet stay connected with their children

during incarceration.

At the end of last year, the state announced it was closing the door on the acclaimed project and using the \$300,000 a year expenditure to plug holes in the Department of Corrections' budget. It was headed for extinction under DOC's direction.

This week, however, the tide turned. Gov. Kate Brown signed the bill that transfers administration of the program from the DOC to the YWCA, along with \$400,000 in general fund money for operations.

What saved this program was less about budgeting – \$400,000 barely registers in the expanse of a state budget – and more about a community that saw tangible and positive results in bucking our nation's archaic stereotypes of felons. This country is winning the race to the bottom when it comes to locking people up – repeatedly and generationally. Where the prevailing image is one of irreparable damage, this program tapped into the power of transformation – and hope.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN LINDSTROM

Above, a still frame from Brian Lindstrom's documentary, "Mothering Inside," about the Family Preservation Project for incarcerated mothers.

From the moment the women in the all-female Coffee Creek Correctional Facility learned that the program was going to be phased out, they went into action. They sought approval from their supervisors to start a letter-writing campaign. Sweet was integral in the effort, writing six-page letters, over and over again, she says. They organized, stayed connected with the legislative session through the League of Woman Voters, and got the word out to anyone who would listen, specifically state lawmakers.

The program also caught the attention of documentary filmmaker Brian Lindstrom, who directed the edgy "Alien Boy: The Life and Death of James Chasse." An advocate for the cause, Lindstrom went to work on a documentary to raise awareness about the program and the lives it has changed, titled "Mothering Inside."

Because beyond the little things – the moments

between mother and child – is the bigger, essential network. Peer mentoring, workshops, training sessions and an ear to bend when the pressure of doubt or shame becomes too much. Sweet says that the lessons and techniques learned in the program extended beyond those enrolled to others in the prison.

Sweet takes full responsibility for her crimes committed and time served – she was incarcerated for 18 months on a drug-related conviction and burglary. She had a drug problem and she screwed up, she says frankly and often. She made bad decisions and she doesn't hide from them.

But even before her incarceration, she felt she didn't measure up to all the expectations of being a mother. And once she was in prison, she knew her children were paying for it. They were ages 5 and 12 when she went inside. The shame was crippling and defeating, compounded by the social isolation of prison. "All the judgment you say about your worst enemy, you put on yourself," Sweet says.

The Family Preservation Project allowed her to "flip the switch," she says. She was released on Feb. 26 to her family and that evening attended the premiere of "Mothering Inside." She is clean and sober and committed to sobriety for life. She lives at home now with her son and daughter, now ages 8 and 15.

State Sen. Chip Shields, D-Portland, who championed the program's funding, said it was the voices of the women and children in the program that made the difference.

"I can say without a doubt that FPP would not have been restored were it not for the courageous advocacy of the mothers in the program," Shields told Street Roots. "FPP participants came down to Salem with little experience in the legislative process, but blew us away with their powerful stories of the program's positive impact on their families. Many mothers spoke about how the program taught them not only how to be a parent, but how to question the cycle of low self-esteem that threatened their ability to succeed and stay clean after prison. They also brought their children, who told us how FPP was the only time they were able to hug their mom, play and read with them in a child-friendly place."

And the evidence bore out that this is more than a compassionate gesture to prisoners and their families.

"Programs like FPP can reduce costs associated with the child welfare system, foster care placement, intergenerational involvement in the criminal justice system, and economic consequences of poor school performance and our safety net system," Shields says. "Programs like FPP turn lives around, and we can't be penny-wise and pound-foolish when it comes to helping children who have incarcerated parents."

Sweet's life was among those turned around.

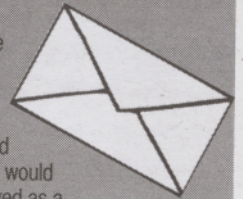
"Finding out that I could still follow my dream was enourmous to me," says Sweet, who has master's degrees in social work and criminal justice.

She might go back into that line of work, but for now, her focus is on how the program – and the attitude that surrounds it – can be expanded. "I want Oregon to be on the map," she says. "I think our state has the right mentality to have this restorative justice rather than criminal justice. I really feel like I'm restored from the process."

Well done, Nova Sweet, and your colleagues, and all the people from the State Capitol and beyond who saved this important program. We too agree that Oregon could serve as a national example. When we focus on people's potential and match it with opportunity, we truly can transform lives.

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