

Terrance

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going to go home after this, but there is somebody that is going to be cold tonight, that needs a blanket. You may not be able to

The event was not the first fundraiser for Terrance

Family

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belongings in a locker in the outer hallway. Outsiders must be escorted by prison staff at all times.

But the Family Preservation Project’s space is informal, and even cozy. With books, toys and craft materials, it’s not unlike a room in a daycare center. Twice a month children arrive at 9 a.m., starting off their time with their mothers by working on an art activity.

“When they get to come in here and play with the other kids, it’s really healthy for them,” says Melissa one of the inmate moms. “People judge it as, ‘This is such a horrible place.’ We make it bad because of the stigma. But they are not uncomfortable here. They are with their moms.”

The program doesn’t just bring moms and kids together. On the outside it supports caregivers, helps with transportation, and helps children attend classes and activities. Family meetings keep everyone on the same page. Inside, it teaches moms new parenting skills and coaches them on how to draw their children into conversation.

“We’re teaching them that people can be here and get better,” Katz says. “People can be here and build healthy relationships.”

11:05 a.m. Lunchtime. Children sit with their mothers at tables, eating sandwiches, chips and apples. Later a plate of birthday cupcakes arrives. It’s always someone’s birthday. Today, there are two birthday kids. Everyone sings Happy Birthday and eats cake, which leaves the youngest kids with frosting all over their little hands and faces.

Competition to get into this program is fierce. Only minimum security inmates are considered. About 75 percent of women inmates are mothers, 60 percent of them with children under age 18. But 40 percent of those children have no contact at all with their mothers – not even a phone call. Many mothers don’t even know where their children are living, says Alisha, whose prison job is in the family resource center.

‘Hundreds of women don’t know where their kids are. I’ve had one lady who hasn’t seen her daughter for three years, and she is seven. It’s really hard to hear that especially if you don’t know anything about your kid.

11:30 It’s quiet reading time. Mark and Antawan sit on either side of Alisha, looking at the pictures while she reads a story. Meryl and Shari read to Leonsea and Taisia in a den they’ve made under a table. Everyone is engrossed and the chatter drops to a hum.

Most inmate moms can’t do anything to help their children with school. These moms speak to their children’s teachers, and they learn how to help them with reading and school work. The result?

RMC Research Corp., which has evaluated the Family Preservation project since 2005, found benefits for the children.

Pre-schoolers in the program for 6 months or more, “demonstrated strong alphabet

give money, but Bless God, you may be able to give blankets or something like that. If you have extra coats – please—you can take them to Portland Rescue Mission. You can take them to Transition Projects; you can take them to Union Gospel Mission... Those are the main spots to take them to.”

The event was not the first fundraiser for Terrance. He was just three years old when his pre-K class raised \$286 for childcare scholarships for low-income families.

recognition skills, and indicator of kindergarten readiness.” The majority of older children had at least 90 percent school attendance rates. And although half of the children started out below grade level with reading, they made progress in the program. Researchers also noted improved behavior, confidence and social skills.

“The Family Preservation Project has been a huge part of my life, and it’s helped me rebuild relationships that I’d damaged from bad choices and drugs,” says Nicole. “I’m really grateful.

“I try to work on things so we can communicate. We have education stuff in the cupboards. I work on sight words and she brings in her homework. It makes me feel I’m included in her life I’m really grateful for that.”

11:45 Clean-up time. The routine is so ingrained that it takes no time at all to clean

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--Alisha

and tidy the room. That frees up the moms for some last minute roughhousing in a small adjoining group room. Nicole hardly looks strong enough to pick up Victoria, but she does, swinging her around and around till they are both out of breath and giggling. Leonsea and Taisia, too big for their moms to lift now, dance around together.

Slowly the women and children gather, sitting on the floor to share their few last minutes together. Antawan and Mark flop on Alisha as if their weight can keep her

close. Ashley has her hand on Sophia’s hair. Malachi and Michael rest on Trina’s lap. Michael’s eyes close but not for long. Everyone knows what comes next.

11:55 Goodbye song. The goodbye song tells the children that although it’s time to go now, they will be back before too long. And the singing is surprisingly cheerful. Routines like this help ease the pain of leaving mom behind. They line up at the door and make their way back through the yard,



Terrance Burton Jr, at center with his hood up, smiles outside McCoy Academy with a few of his friends.

back through the locked door, past the guard and the metal detector, back to their daily lives on the outside.

Noon: The mothers come back to the family room. Usually they go over the events of the day, talk about what they did right, and what they could have done better. Today sitting around a table, they tell their stories one after another. They talk about their crimes, which range from driving drunk to theft, robbery and a weapons charge. They

turnabout, she brings her feet together in a neat pose, and clasps her hands together demurely. Everyone laughs, but she’s serious.

“I want to learn how to be a healthy mom,” she says. “My 6-year-old is having a hard time, so I learned how to understand him and not just spank him ...I can go out now and I can show my family how I can talk to my kids without having to spank them. I’ve learned how not to be mentally and physically abusive –because that’s what my family does.

“Without this program I know I would never have made it. I came here so young.”

Postscript: Women in Oregon have been going to prison in increasing numbers, and staying there longer thanks to “tough on crime” laws, such as Oregon’s Measure 57, which increased penalties for drugs, property and DUI offenses.

“Women are the fastest growing criminal justice population, and it’s not because they are becoming more violent,” says Emily Salisbury, assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice at Portland State University.

“This is a population that often has struggled significantly with abuse and victimization. You can almost pretty much assume that every woman in that prison has experienced some kind of victimization, whether it is physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Women don’t enter prison for the same reasons as men. Their pathways to offending are different.”

About 15,000 children in Oregon have a parent in prison. Those children are at increased risk of mental health and behavior problems, as well as school dropout, and future criminal behavior.

But the good news is that many of these risks can be reduced through programs that improve mothers’ parenting skills and help them to be successful outside prison.

FPP is one example of an evidence-based program that works long-term to strengthen families and support them as they leave prison.

Almost all the women who enter the program complete it. And those who complete the program have been successful outside prison.

“I think we’ve lost two women,” says Katz. “They broke some rules and were sent to medium security.”

RMC’s latest report, published in August 2012, says the Family Preservation Project, “consistently provides high-quality services based on best practices research.”