

# 'It was the saddest thing I've ever seen in my life'

PARENTING continued  
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In the best of times, teenagers can be frustrating to parent, but if you've been away in prison for years, unable to keep up with the daily details of your children's lives, some find it a very long road to re-establish those connections.

Schneider's situation is hardly unique: The number of children who have a mother in prison has increased exponentially since 1980, according to data from The Sentencing Project.

Between then and 2019, when the most recent national data was compiled, the number of incarcerated women increased by more than 700 percent, from 26,378 in 1980 to 222,455 in 2019. Of those, 60 percent had a child under 18 for whom they were the primary or sole caregiver. Some have few visits while their mother is serving time. Others, like Schneider's children, were more fortunate.

"When I was in prison, the kids came to see me (regularly) because my mom made the commitment to get them here," Schneider says. "She's amazing. I thought (because of that) things were going to be different when I got home."

Her mother, Tribal member Debby Childers, would drive out to Sheridan from her home in the Portland area, pick up the girls and go to the prison in Wilsonville for visitation, then drive the children back to Sheridan. This meant commuting hundreds of extra miles a month for her mother.

"While I was there, they talked about how they couldn't wait until I got home and we could be together," Schneider, 36, says. "I knew it was going to take a lot of work, but I thought maybe I would live with them or at least their father and I would share custody."

While in prison, Schneider met and married her wife, also named Andrea. The couple settled in Portland after both of them were released from prison. Schneider considered moving back to Sheridan, where her children live, but ultimately decided that returning to the same area and lifestyle she left behind wouldn't be good for her recovery or future.

When she was first paroled,



Schneider lived with her mother and saw her children frequently. With the COVID-19 pandemic raging, youths were doing remote learning, and all sports and activities were cancelled. As pandemic restrictions began to ease in 2021, most teens were eager to get back to something that resembled normal life.

"Sports and academics began to be a bigger focus for my kids and they just didn't have the time (to spend weekends in Portland) or there were other school activities happening," Schneider says. "It's great that they do well at school, but I don't feel like our relationship is where it needs to be. ... I was out of their lives for so long. We do live far away from each other and eventually we stopped talking as much."

*Smoke Signals* is not naming Schneider's children, who have a different last name, for privacy reasons.

Schneider recalls the first visit with her children after being sent to prison in November 2014 as being very emotional.

"It was the saddest thing I've ever seen in my life," she says. "I was holding (my youngest) and she was just bawling. It was the hardest thing when they left after that first day. They were screaming and crying, not wanting to leave their mom in prison. It was horrible."

However, over the years things improved, especially when Schneider started participating in a program designed to bring some sense of normalcy to visits.

Although she wasn't eligible for the Family Preservation Project, which is an effort to help lessen the effects of incarceration on mothers and their children by providing visitation in a home-like environment within the prison campus, her children were able to participate in the Through A Child's Eyes program. Sponsored by the Wilsonville Rotary Club, the program provides bonding opportunities for incarcerated mothers and their children through different events at the prison. Inmates must take parenting classes and have no prison infractions to participate.

"While I was in prison, I was more reliable (as a parent) than I had been for a long time," Schneider says. "I made promises that were kept. Whatever money I had, I spent on my kids. That helped a lot."

When she was released, she found her children weren't as open with their feelings as they had been before.

"It's been really hard," she says. "I think maybe those old feelings are starting to come up and they're really starting to see things (from a different perspective). I'm not 100 percent sure because we haven't talked much about it."

## Drinking, drug use began as a young teen

Schneider grew up in Grand Ronde with a close extended family, spending lots of time with her grandparents, whom she describes as "very lenient."

"There wasn't a whole lot to do here and I grew up in a safe environment, but was also around a lot of people who were drinking and smoking cigarettes or weed, so it seemed almost normal to me," Schneider recalls.

She began smoking marijuana at age 13 and drinking regularly with a friend. However, she managed to hide her behavior well enough to participate in the Grand Ronde Royalty program and school sports.

"I was juggling a double life, but did pretty well until I got pregnant with my oldest daughter at 17," Schneider says. "I wasn't a bad kid or anything. I tried to finish school, but it was just too tough. It got too frustrating."

She dropped out of school her senior year and later earned a GED.

Eighteen months later, she became pregnant with her second daughter and soon after a third.

"I started taking (opioid) pills in between those pregnancies," she says. "It was a secret. Nobody knew. Then, I split up with the kids' dad a few months after my last daughter was born in 2007. He wasn't really actively involved at all and I felt all alone. I always envisioned certain things, but they never happened."

After the breakup, Schneider began using pills more and then switched to injecting heroin after the prescription opioids became too expensive to obtain and were made more tamper resistant.

Throughout most of her drug use, Schneider held a job and functioned to a high enough degree that few

knew how far downward she had spiraled.

"I went straight to shooting up heroin because I wanted that high right away," she says. "I was an instant gratification person and kept doing that for seven years. It got to the point where I had to inject through veins in my ankle and hands. ... Nobody knew how bad it was and I got to the point where I didn't want to live. I tried to kill myself. I took all of this stuff (drugs) just wanting to die. Then, I woke up and was in the hospital."

After her suicide attempt, Schneider went to an inpatient drug treatment facility. She relapsed a month after completing treatment, met another heroin addict at a state Department of Human Services office and he became her boyfriend. Eventually, the two broke up and she met another man who became her husband.

After escaping an abusive marriage, she was homeless and couch surfing when she met another man, and the two began robbing people and stealing from cars to support their addictions. There was a stint in jail, then another attempt at sobriety until eventually Schneider was arrested in December 2013 and convicted of armed robbery, a Measure 11 offense. This meant a mandatory minimum sentence of five years and 10 months behind bars.

Schneider utilized some of her time incarcerated in a positive way, learning how to make eyeglasses and receiving a certification, which resulted in a job at an optometrist's office after she was released. She stopped using drugs and stayed clean. She also met her wife and the couple married in 2020 while they were still incarcerated.

They now live in a quiet, spacious apartment along the Columbia River with their two dogs and Schneider is focused on her future. Her wife is a tow truck driver and she is hoping to launch a website to promote the business.

"I'd like to go back to school and be a graphic designer," she says. "I've always wanted to be my own boss. I also know what I want in life and from relationships. I never want to feel the way I did when I was using drugs or have those toxic relationships again. I can't do anything in life if that is the path I choose."

She's also hoping, with time, that her relationship with her children will become closer. She has a room in her new home ready for them if they choose to visit.

"I want to make sure they know I am here for them," Schneider says. "It's been hard. For so long, we couldn't have a normal relationship where I was just mom."

Schneider cautions youth to listen to the positive influences in their lives and warns that getting into drugs is a slippery slope.

"It's not just playing around and experimenting," she says. "First it's social, then it becomes normal and then you need it. That's all you think about. They call it, 'Playing in the devil's playground,' and it's the worst feeling ever." ■

## Clinic offering second COVID-19 booster doses

Tribal Health Services Executive Director Kelly Rowe announced on Thursday, March 31, that the Grand Ronde Health & Wellness Center is now offering a second COVID-19 booster dose of the Moderna vaccine for people 50 and older who are at least four months beyond their previous booster dose.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is recommending that people with compromised immune systems age 12 and older also receive boosters. However, Rowe added, Tribal health care staff are recommending people consult with their providers to make that decision.

Rowe said that immunity tends to wane after three months and that people who had received a booster dose of the vaccine were 21 times less likely to die and seven times less likely to be hospitalized during the recent omicron surge.

To schedule an appointment for a second booster shot, contact the Tribal clinic at 503-879-2032. ■