



For I was in prison and you visited me

By Elizabeth Fernandez '79

More than half the women in California prisons are mothers. Some go months or even years without seeing their children. But with a bus service dubbed the Chowchilla Family Express, Eric DeBode '88 is trying to change that.

With dawn still an hour away, the bus speeds south through the Central Valley. A DVD of a cartoon plays on a television monitor, but few of the dozens of passengers aboard are watching. Instead they pensively sip coffee, or they sleep, draped in blankets and scrunched into seats.

*Sunday visit: Inmate Tracy Jones cuddles her grandchildren, Johana and Alexia.
Photo: Charles Barry*



Their bus left Sacramento at 4 a.m., pausing several times to pick up riders in towns along Highway 99: Stockton, Manteca, Modesto. Two other buses departed even earlier—one took off from south Los Angeles at 3 a.m., another left Redding just after midnight. Destination for all three buses: a prison complex in Chowchilla that houses more than 8,000 women, the nation’s largest concentration of female prisoners. Waiting there are the mothers and sisters, wives and daughters of the bus riders. For some, it’s been years since they’ve seen one another.

It is Palm Sunday, and it’s the first anniversary of the Chowchilla Family Express, an innovative program that connects inmates with their children and loved ones outside prison. Begun in March 2007 by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation in partnership with the Center for Restorative Justice Works (CRJW), the Family Express is the first state-funded program of its kind. Operating on a \$400,000 annual budget, which covers the costs of chartering six buses per month on average from various points in the state, the program has reunited more than 2,400 passengers with family members at Chowchilla’s two women’s prisons. The prisons are located in Madera County, near the intersection of Highway 99 and Highway 152—about 150 miles from San Francisco, and more than 250 miles from Los Angeles.

An estimated 200,000 children in California have a parent in prison, but largely because of economic and logistical difficulties they rarely see each other. “Prisons for the most part aren’t in easily accessible places,” says Eric DeBode ’88, executive director of the Express. DeBode is in his mid-40s and lives in Oak View, 90 minutes from Los Angeles. He is also a former Jesuit who has, over the years, worked with the homeless and with troubled youth.

*Dawn in the valley:
Frank Geiger with his 2-
year-old son, Emeliano,
on the ride to Chowchilla
Photo: Charles Barry*



"Visitation programs are a cost-effective crime prevention tool," he says. "By helping to maintain family bonds, the Chowchilla Family Express will help parents and children stay together and hopefully reduce the likelihood of people re-offending—and that's good for everyone."

State prison officials concur that the program is fostering critical familial bonds, enabling mothers—despite their incarceration—to play positive roles in their children's lives.

Frequent fliers

At 6:50 a.m., with the first glint of sunrise, the passengers stir. Ten miles away is the town of Madera. And breakfast.

Despite the early hour, the Elks Lodge on West Sixth Street is bustling. There is freshly cooked bacon, eggs, coffee, and an open-arms welcome from Grandmothers of the Light.

"Restrooms are on the left," volunteers say, helpfully directing sleepy bus riders around the building.

A private nonprofit organization, Grandmothers of the Light was established to help the families of incarcerated women in California. Funded entirely by donations, the group also provides Family Express riders with travel bags of amenities. On this day, a table is piled with blankets and pillows. Another table offers stuffed bunnies and other toys.



Number One Bus Rider: Five-year-old Mya Williams has ridden the bus 14 times to visit her aunt. This time she traveled with her grandfather, Walter Williams.

Photo: Charles Barry

"This is lovely," says Tamarasha Bolling, 21, sifting through a goodybag of blankets, pillows, coloring books, notepads. "I thought we'd just come in here and eat pancakes. Our arms are loaded!"

Riding with her cousin, Bolling is making her second trip on the Family Express. A Sacramento resident, she's visiting her aunt, imprisoned since 2005. "We wouldn't

be able to make it ourselves to see her. A lot of people can't afford the trip," she says. "I'd come every day if I could, it means so much to my aunt. When she first saw us, it was like she'd won a million dollars."

As bus riders eat sweet rolls and strawberries, DeBode speaks into a microphone. "I love this program," he says. "You get up ungodly early; we want you to know how important you are. You bring healing and hope and the possibility of a bright new future. We are so happy you can deepen your relationships with your families."

DeBode then hands out "frequent flier" awards. One goes to Diane Bates, 68, for traveling the farthest—she spent six hours riding a Greyhound bus from her Oregon home in order to meet the Family Express bus in Redding.

Another award goes to the bus program's "number one bus rider," Mya Williams. She's just 5 years old. The pint-size road warrior has been a Family Express passenger 14 times, traveling from her home in Ontario, Calif., with her grandmother or her grandfather, or sometimes both to visit her aunt, Latasha, incarcerated since 2005.

A family affair: Tina Castro, in the white sweatshirt, brings her grandchildren Tina, 9, Fabian, 7, Navaeh, 3, and Michael Marie, 14, to visit daughter Lucretia Gonzalez, center.

Photo: Charles Barry



"We have a special present for you," DeBode tells the beaming youngster. He presents her with a green backpack.

"We've ridden the bus since it started," says Mya's grandmother, Linda Williams. "It lets my daughter know we love her and we support her. When my daughter was in county jail, we'd bring Mya—but the only relationship they could have was through a glass window. Now, because of the bus program, they are able to visit and touch each other. It's very emotional."

Though the journey is long, taking about five hours each way, Mya is a patient, seasoned traveler. She sleeps, plays with other children, colors in the activity books that her grandmother brings. She's even learned some of the ABCs aboard the Family Express.

"Mya met her future husband on the bus, a little boy," says Williams, laughing. "She says she loves him."

After a rousing round of "Happy Birthday" to commemorate the first anniversary of the Express, it's time to get back on the bus.

"My mother is my lighthouse."

Just before 9 a.m., the buses pull into the parking lot of Valley State Prison for Women. Housing some 3,800 inmates, the dune-colored San Joaquin Valley facility is one of the largest women's prisons in the world.



"My mother is my lighthouse," says Jennifer Fletcher, left, as her mother, Diane Bates, visits her in prison.

Photo: Charles Barry

The excited bus riders spend the next hour being processed—undergoing security checks and getting ultraviolet stamps on their hands that will later permit passage out of the prison. After passing through a locked barbed-wire enclosure, the travelers then walk through the prison's main yard and into one of two visiting rooms. There, sitting on brown chairs at brown tables, they spend the next five hours.

The rooms are large and loud, filled with the sounds of laughter and love. Vending machines steadily dispense candy and other snacks.

Diane Bates, the devoted Oregon mother, sits holding the hand of her daughter, Jennifer Fletcher, 38. When they take a stroll around the room, mother and daughter walk with their arms wrapped around the other's waist.

"My daughter and I are very very close," Bates says. "She's been my joy my whole life."

Fletcher is a "long-termer," incarcerated for six years. "This is a really intense place," she says. "It's really hard to be here. My mother is my lighthouse, a beacon of light."

She begins to weep.

"These are tears of joy," Fletcher says, smiling and vainly dabbing at her cheeks.

"This last week was so wonderful, so full of anticipation. Last night when I went to bed I couldn't sleep."

Some of the prisoners have been convicted of violent crimes—from carjacking to murder. Many are in for drug-related offenses; others are here for less serious offenses, like forgery. But the reasons that led to incarceration are generally not the topic of conversation this day—that's not the point of these visits.

A smiling DeBode moves from table to table, chatting and offering cupcakes. The treats along with t-shirts were supplied by the Center for Restorative Justice Works to commemorate the Family Express's first anniversary.

Break the cycle

The Family Express is modeled on a program launched in California in 2000 called Get on the Bus, which began by bringing seven children to visit their mothers in prison on Mother's Day. Now Get on the Bus brings hundreds of family members together on Mother's Day and Father's Day. The Family Express took that good idea and has made it work year-round.

Homeward bound: making the long trip back from Chowchilla
Photo: Charles Barry



"What is going on in the visiting room touches all of us," says Wendy Still. As associate director for female offender programs and services with the Department of Corrections, Still in essence is the godmother of the Family Express, shepherding it through state channels. She rode one of the buses to commemorate the program's successful first year.

"This is exactly what the rehabilitation part of our mission looks like," she says.

"Our goal is to help people re-enter society, and to break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration."

Valley State's warden, Tina Hornbeak, is an equally ardent supporter.



Breakfast time: Paulina Washington brings daughter Johana to visit her grandmother at Chowchilla.

Photo: Charles Barry

"I know what it feels like to have a child on your lap, to hug and smell and touch him," says Hornbeak, mother of a 5-year-old. "It is really important for the children to know that they still have a mother who loves them. And the bonding helps the women get through their days and their weeks. It gives them hope. For those who won't get out for a long time, it helps them be a part of their children's lives."

Tracy Jones, 45, is one of those. She has already served 14 years of a life sentence. She spends most of the visiting hours cuddling her two little granddaughters, brought to the prison by their mother, Paulina.

"Are you the princess? And are you the queen?" she asks the girls as their faces increasingly become smeared with chocolate cupcake. "Grandma loves you."

A mother of three, Jones cherishes each moment of the visit. She says the memories linger long past the departure of the visitors. "I didn't get to see my children for seven years. All of my cellmates would leave the room on visiting days. During the holidays it was really, really hard. When I know my daughter's coming, it means a lot. It helps me keep communicating with her and my grandkids. It keeps your hopes up. It makes you feel like you are out of the prison world for a while."

In addition to seeing the pragmatic value of the Family Express, DeBode feels the project is both a matter of duty and an expression of faith. "We are called to look around us and to have a positive, life-giving relationship with those who are struggling," he says. "You have to make common cause with people who are homeless, who are sick or suffering. In that, you will know Jesus and the Cross. And on a good day, you just might glimpse the resurrection."



Elizabeth Fernandez '79 is a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.



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How former Jesuit Eric DeBode '88 wound up behind the wheel of the Chowchilla Family Express.

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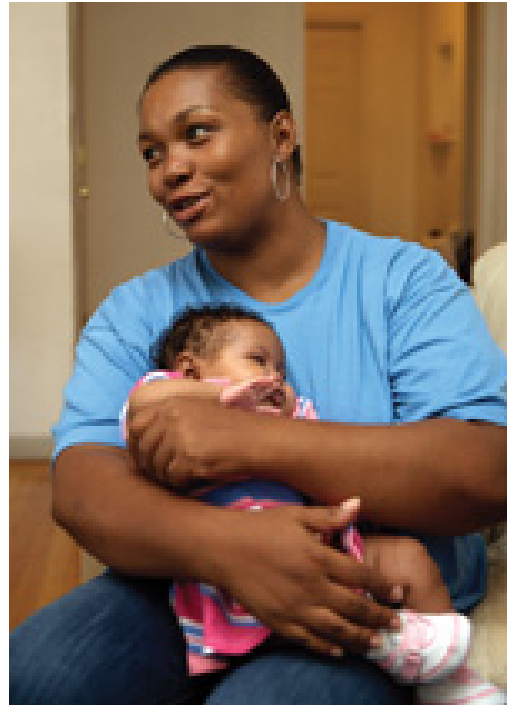
For more than 50 years, Friends Outside in Santa Clara County has been working to act as a bridge between prisoners and the world outside. Read about the organization, and the work **Kate Trevelyan Hall '06** is doing with them.

Great expectations

Squaring prison and pregnancy

It is May 2007, and the Chowchilla Family Express is making one of its early runs from Northern California. In the rear of the bus sit Brenda Strickland Haynes and her son, Lonnell Oates. They are heading to Valley State Prison for Women to visit Oates' girlfriend, Tawana Ward, pregnant with his child. For Haynes, it's her first grandchild.

Tawana Ward with infant Leilonni
Photo: Charles Barry



It's also the first time that either have seen Ward in six months. "I'm hoping we can feel the baby kick," Haynes says.

A few hours later, Haynes is standing in the visiting room, gently patting Ward's protruding belly. "Look at that!" Haynes says. The due date is only a few weeks away.

"I wanted to see you so badly."

For her part, Ward says the visit will help her make it through her final stretch in prison; she is serving eight months on a drug offense.

The man behind the Family Express, Eric DeBode, watches the family, beaming: Reunions like this are why the program was created. He promises to visit the family after the baby is born.

But there is one problem: Ward's sentence will keep her in prison beyond the date of the baby's birth. So he sets about trying to convince prison authorities to release Ward early, or at least to allow her, once the baby is born, to fulfill the remainder of the sentence in a halfway house so she can be together with her baby.

Leilonni weighs nine pounds at birth. But the birth is difficult; the baby's heart stops briefly. A few hours later, the newborn is transported from a hospital in Madera to an intensive care unit at a larger hospital. Ward holds her baby for a few hours. A day later, she is sent back to prison for the final seven weeks of her term.

"A baby shouldn't be without her mother," DeBode tells me. "We really tried to fight for them."

And then, in August, on a bright summer afternoon, DeBode flies to the Bay Area for the promised reunion. In Brenda Haynes' living room, he cradles little Leilonni and gently touches her cheek.

"Oh, aren't you precious?" he says. "She's so beautiful. It's been a few years since I had a little girl this size."

He hands the new parents a few gifts: a purple Family Express t-shirt and a stuffed puppy for the baby. For DeBode, the Family Express represents the culmination of decades of abiding dedication to social service. He and his wife adopted an infant girl five years ago; he spends the next hour sharing parenting tips.

"Eric is awesome," says Haynes. "For him, it's not just about the ride—it goes beyond that. He takes all of this so personally."—EF

The man behind the bus



Eric DeBode

Photo: Charles Barry

Eric DeBode has acquired quite a jail "jacket" of his own—he's been arrested more than a dozen times. In his case, the arrests came during protests against the death penalty, immigrant bashing, nuclear testing, and police brutality.

Born in Santa Monica in 1964, the son of a fireman and a homemaker, DeBode volunteered at a soup kitchen in high school, and he began considering a life in the priesthood.

“Jesus taught us to follow him by what he did,” DeBode says. “What he did was work with the ill and the suffering, the marginalized. To me, to be in the priesthood wasn’t mystical, it was practical.”

In 1983 DeBode was accepted into the Jesuit Novitiate in Santa Barbara. He worked with homeless people and volunteered at a juvenile hall in East Los Angeles. In 1985, he became a Jesuit Scholastic and enrolled at Santa Clara.

In addition to working with the homeless as a volunteer through the Santa Clara Community Action Program, DeBode regularly made midnight forays with another Jesuit around the Mission campus, chalking onto sidewalks quotations from Ovid, Gandhi, Immanuel Kant, Dorothy Day, and Daniel Berrigan.

One night the miscreants were nailed by campus security. “Bob Senkewicz read us the riot act,” DeBode says ruefully. But that didn’t stop DeBode from winning the Riordan Award for Community Service. The day after graduating, the young Jesuit went to Central America to study history, politics, and economics.

He went on to enroll in the graduate philosophy program at Gonzaga University but didn’t complete his degree, instead moving to East Los Angeles to work at Dolores Mission Church. There he served students who’d been expelled from other schools because of gang involvement.

But in 1992, DeBode left the Jesuit order. It was an extremely difficult decision, he says, but he felt called to work with the homeless; he moved to Tacoma and served as director of a homeless drop-in center.

In 1996, he returned to California, joining the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. He earned \$10 a week plus room and board, running a soup kitchen on Skid Row that served 1,000 people a day.

In 2000, he became the Southern California coordinator for California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty. He now works out of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles’ Restorative Justice/Detention Ministry Office.

“Eric has great heart as well as great intellect,” says Jeff Dietrich, who helped found Catholic Worker in 1970. Dietrich has known DeBode for more than 20 years. “He has a great desire for justice in the world. He loves the Gospel—the vision of the kingdom is what he desires.”

While DeBode was at Catholic Worker, he met and fell in love with Alice Lins Meier, a teacher at a school for immigrants. They married in 2002. A year later, they adopted an infant girl, Liliana. They hope to adopt again, but in the meantime, they live simply, sharing their Oak View home with another couple.—EF

Friends Outside

Helping families break the cycle of imprisonment

By Mary Kolesnikova '06



Seven out of 10 children with incarcerated parents end up in the prison system themselves, according to the Department of Justice. In California, nearly one in 10 children will have a parent in custody during childhood.

It's a vicious cycle, and **Kate Trevelyan-Hall '06**, who writes grants and raises

funds for the nonprofit Friends Outside in Santa Clara County, sees the effects of incarceration on inmates' children every day.

"If you're a 10-year-old kid and you're dealing with the fact that your dad disappeared overnight, and you can't talk about it because of the stigma, it becomes a behavioral thing," she explains. "Your grades start slipping, you get into drugs. Cries for help when you're a kid can escalate to severe charges when you're older." Trevelyan-Hall started volunteering at Friends Outside after discussing prison topics for her senior anthropology thesis at SCU with Professor George Westmark. "He told me to look at the families. It is a forgotten population," she says. "You see crime on the news and you think, 'Good, lock them up!' But you do not think about the families of that person. I never had, and it was an eye-opener."

Steps ahead

Friends Outside was founded in 1955 in Santa Clara County by Rosemary Goode-nough, who was concerned about what happened to families when a family member was incarcerated. Now the organization has eight branches statewide helping those left behind by incarceration.

You've got a friend: from left, Executive Director Dave Gonzales, Steps Ahead program home visitors Leticia Padilla and Rita Duarte, and Kate Trevelyan-Hall.



David Gonzales, who serves as executive director of the organization's Santa Clara County office, says one of the most important programs now is Steps Ahead. It serves the caregivers of children whose parents are in prison by giving them in-home lessons on parenting and child development.

"We are trying to intervene in this cycle of poor parenting and help these parents find new perspectives," Gonzales says. "Working with the children to provide them a loving, nourishing family environment, where they don't follow a parent into jail, is one of our best outcomes."

One client, who we'll call Sabrina, shared her experience through the staff at Friends Outside. "I was incarcerated and had lost custody of my 1-year-old daughter. I had been in and out of jail for years... it was the only life I knew," she says. "When I got out, I started to work with the Steps Ahead program. I got help on how to be a better parent." The payoff? Five months ago, Sabrina was able to get her daughter back.

Breaking the cycle was not easy for Sabrina. She had to move away from her hometown, where many of her friends were still mired in gangs and drugs. "It was hard, but I had to give my daughter the life she deserves and the opportunities I never had."

**[Read more about Friends Outside in Santa Clara County.](#) Writer Mary Kole-
snikova's work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and elsewhere. She
also works as a tutor at 826 Valencia in San Francisco.**