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Missing Mothers

By Lauren Ober, Free Press Staff Writer

WATERBURY — Patience Francis spent Saturday at a Mother's Day tea party held by her youngest son, Dylan.

As the towheaded 2-year-old poured make-believe tea into tiny plastic mugs, Francis cooed over her baby. She boasted about his language skills and his knowledge of animal noises. Every so often, Dylan's 14-year-old brother, Cody, would chime in with another of the toddler's talents.

Once Dylan served the tea to his mother, he passed a mug to his big brother. Cody put the cup to his mouth and made a face.

"There are bugs in here!" he said, making Dylan squeal with delight. "I don't want any of your tea if there are bugs in it."

Francis sat in the grass and laughed. A smile spread across her face as she watched her boys. Save for the high brick walls and concertina wire that ringed the yard at Dale Women's Facility, Saturday's tea party was perfect.

Francis is one of the roughly 130 women in the Vermont prison system who will spend Mother's Day separated from their children. For Francis and many jailed mothers, their challenge, beyond staying sober and not reoffending, is maintaining their parental bonds and making sure they remain intact after their release.

With the female prison population in Vermont having grown exponentially in the past 10 years, more women are finding themselves in Francis' position — struggling to be good mothers while behind bars.

Breaking the cycle

Since 1997, the number of women incarcerated in Vermont has increased by 480 percent, according to Department of Corrections statistics. For example, 42 women were in prison in June 1997; in June 2007 that number was 148.

Over the course of 2001, Vermont had 634 women in prison. In 2007, that number spiked to 1,015, accounting for 14 percent of the incarcerated population in the state.

Of those 1,015 women — whose numbers represent a 3 percent increase over 2006 — most were incarcerated due to nonviolent drug and property crimes. Many were locked up on parole violations.

The rising number of women in prison in Vermont and around the country is a multifaceted and cyclical issue, prison officials say. Chronic poverty, abuse, and drug and alcohol addiction play significant roles in the escalation of women's incarceration.

With that increase comes a growing number of children whose primary caregivers are imprisoned and who are left in the care of other family members or placed in foster homes. Often these children already face the challenge of being low-income and then must deal with the absence of a parent.

Francis remembers when her life started to spin out of control. She was 13 and her parents had recently divorced. She began drinking, unaware of the destructive path she trod.

The alcohol helped numb Francis to the abuse she endured at the hands of family members. By the age of 19, Francis was using cocaine and about to give birth to the first of four sons.

The first of her long list of criminal charges came in 1999 at age 24 after she was arrested for repeatedly stealing from a grocery store. She also incurred a DUI and a number of other violations that landed her in prison for 15 months. At the time, she and her husband, who were high school sweethearts, had three children.

Francis returned to prison a year ago after selling two hunting rifles to a federal agent for \$160.

As a convicted felon, Francis knew she shouldn't possess guns, but she needed the money. After three years off cocaine, Francis had relapsed.

She remembers the day nearly a year ago when police took her away. She kissed Dylan goodbye and said she'd be back soon.

When the prison door slammed at Dale, Francis panicked. The smell of the place made her sick, and the sounds brought memories of her previous incarceration. One thought ran through her head on a loop — "Oh, my God, I'm never leaving."

Francis couldn't sleep in prison. Her ears rang with the sound of her baby crying. She knew she had done wrong, but the separation from her children, especially her baby, seemed more punishment than she could bear. Since Dylan was born, he had rarely left her side.

Francis' story is all too familiar. Cynthia Charbonneau, a fellow inmate at Dale Women's Facility, was 18 when she began using drugs. Soon she got involved in crack cocaine, which ultimately led to her arrest for unlawful trespass, larceny and simple assault. Her 4-month-old son is in state custody, and her 3-year-old daughter lives with Charbonneau's mother. Not long ago, the 21-year-old said, she began using drugs again in prison.

Eileen Yandow, who served 10 months at Southeast State Correctional Facility in Windsor and nine months in the Tapestry Program in Brattleboro, had a long history of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her male partners before she began abusing drugs and alcohol.

She picked up a DUI charge in 2003 and racked up other charges in 2005 and 2006 for cocaine possession, assault and grand larceny. The emotionally abusive relationships finally took their toll, the mother of five said, and she snapped, threatening to kill herself with a butcher knife while high. Now out of prison, Yandow, 42, is doing her best to take care of her children while trying to stay clean and sober and emotionally grounded.

Of the women in prison, 50 percent to 70 percent are incarcerated for parole violations, often involving substance abuse, says Jill Evans, director of the Women Offenders and Family Services Division of the Vermont Department of Corrections. Only 10 percent of the women end up serving more than a year, but that is time enough to lose jobs, housing, and most crushing, their children.

Living with a void

It is impossible to talk about women in prison in Vermont without talking about their children, Evans says. On this Mother's Day, about 150 women are in prison in Vermont. Eighty percent of them are mothers, and 75 percent of those were their children's primary caregiver. Nationally, for every parent incarcerated, two children are left behind, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

"Leaving their children is an absolutely devastating thing for these women," Evans said.

The void can be paralyzing, which is why the Department of Corrections, along with a number of

nonprofits around the state, work to keep incarcerated mothers connected with their children whenever possible. A February report by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan social policy think tank, suggested that children who maintain contact with their incarcerated parents face fewer behavioral and social problems, while regular contact with their children means those incarcerated are less likely to re-offend.

Jessica Kell facilitates parenting programs at Dale run by the Vermont Children's Aid Society. Every Monday, mothers in prison meet to make cards and crafts for their children, share strategies for parenting from prison and generally brag about their children's accomplishments.

Despite their incarceration, most mothers in prison are devoted to their children and make every attempt to remain close with them, even if they no longer have parental rights. Kell said the support group is important because it helps keep families together and shows that the female offenders are trying to be better parents and atone for their actions.

"Hopefully, by participating in these programs, people recognize the work the women do to stay connected with their kids," Kell said.

After Francis was sentenced to jail, the state moved to terminate her parental rights. As the incarcerated mothers say, Francis was "TPRed." Her husband was in prison on assault charges, and the boys were adopted by their paternal grandmother.

Francis is quick to take ownership of her failings, but the termination of her parental rights is a sting that won't go away. Her upbringing, she claims, is partially to blame for her criminality and drug use.

"I got lost," Francis said. "Nobody told me I was special or worth it."

Every time she talks to her four children, Francis makes a point to tell them how much she loves them and how proud she is of them. Because of all their activities — baseball, after-school art programs, piano lessons — plus the traveling expense, the boys can't make weekly visits to Dale, so phone calls have to suffice.

For Francis's oldest son, Cody, the phone calls and monthly visits aren't enough. All the boys miss their mother, but Cody carries the particularly heavy burden of being caretaker and confidant to the younger boys, while dealing with his own adolescence.

"It's hard times," Cody said.

Francis chokes up talking about listening to one of her middle sons play "Heart and Soul" on the piano for her before darting off to baseball practice. Francis, who has deep brown eyes, apple cheekbones and a knot of brown hair clumped on the top of her head, beams when she talks about reading to her youngest son over the phone. She lights up when recalling their silly conversations.

Yandow, who spent 19 months away from her children, says she learned how to parent over the phone. She says she called all the time and was sure to tell them how much she loved them.

"It wasn't like I had nothing to do with them," Yandow said.

These types of telephone interactions are essential to maintaining a healthy mother-child relationship. In-person visits are vital, Kell says, but these phone check-ins are the next best thing.

"They need to hear her voice. They need to know she's OK," Kell said.

More than love

Starr Porta spent nearly two years in prison for aggravated assault. The knowledge that her then 3-year-old daughter would be waiting for her when she got out helped her through the experience.

For many mothers, explaining to their children why they're going away is one of the hardest parts of

the incarceration. Porta, 27, told her daughter, Journey, that she was having a “time-out.” She told her that “mommies aren’t perfect” and sometimes they make mistakes.

While at Dale, Porta counted down the days until the 1½-hour mother-child visits. They were the only remedy for her constant heartache, she said.

“I woke up every day having my heart break,” Porta said. “I thought I didn’t deserve her and that I ruined her life. I wished I would just die, but she’s what kept me going.”

Porta, well-spoken, introspective and willing to accept responsibility for her crime, was recently paroled and works for a landscaping company in Chittenden County. She says she became a better mother in prison. She is closer to her daughter because there is no artifice. Her daughter has been forced to see her mother for who she really is.

“Our bond is stronger than ever. There’s no lies, no fallacies,” Porta said.

Porta doesn’t have custody of her daughter, but sees her every weekend. Sometimes when they get together, Journey is angry. She doesn’t understand why her mother left her. At times, Porta feels that she’s done wrong by her daughter.

“I’m trying to get over this inner shame, this inner guilt,” Porta said.

When she can move beyond that, she and Journey are just another mother and child reading stories or playing on the playground.

Not every mother in prison pines for her children or cares to be a good parent. And not every child of an incarcerated parent wants to maintain contact. For some children, it’s best if there’s no contact. But for most, the bonds remain unbreakable.

“Kids love their parents. Just because mom forged some checks doesn’t mean her 4-year-old loves her any less,” Kell said.

Despite the women’s actions, they are mothers before anything else. For Francis, being a mother is “the best thing in the world.”

Francis’ cell wall is a patchwork of photos of her boys and pictures they’ve made for her. Every night before bed she kisses each one of her boys’ photos. They are her main motivation for staying clean.

She knows that her criminal record isn’t a reflection of her parenting ability, but she also knows she’s got a long way to go to make amends.

“What makes me a good mother is that I know that loving my kids is not enough. Good parenting is discipline and guidance and wisdom and plain old common sense,” Francis said. “If loving them was enough, I’d still be with them.”

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