



INSIDE Journal

PRISON FELLOWSHIP'S NEWSPAPER FOR AMERICA'S PRISONS VOLUME 25, NO. 2 SPRING 2016

The Street to Deliverance

by A.R. Quinn

H OUSTON, TX—The streets are no place for a kid on his own.

But by the time he was 15, Arthur Medina, a runaway, had no address, no security, and no real plan. So he turned to crime in hopes it would help him survive. He earned a living by stealing cars and running them across the border into Mexico.

Before too long, things went wrong. During a failed carjacking attempt, Arthur took someone's life. He was just 17, and after being convicted of the crime, he was staring down a life sentence. It would be 20 years—two decades' worth of birthdays and Christmases—before he was even eligible for parole.

"I felt my life was over," he says.

But things were about to get even worse. Though Arthur was young, he made up for his vulnerability with fury. When a



Arthur Medina (right) poses with Rick (left), the employer who was willing to take a chance on him after he was released from a Texas prison in 2011.

fellow prisoner tried to sexually assault him, Arthur fought him off with a vengeance. He nearly killed him. That got another 119 years tacked onto his sentence—including 15 years in solitary.

At the Crossroads

In 1989, a prosecutor came to visit Arthur and challenged with a simple question: "Do you believe in God?"

Arthur felt something stirring in his heart at the question.

"Yes, I do," he responded.

"Then why don't you get to know Him?" the prosecutor suggested.

Shortly after, Arthur began reading the Bible. He felt like his life needed to get on a new path, but he knew it wouldn't be easy. The gang he had joined in prison would not support his desire to do things God's way.

"I had to decide if I wanted to continue down the path of destruction or the path of deliverance," he remembers.

Arthur chose God's way. His

Photo by provided by Prison Fellowship

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The Victims No One Sees

by Mary Ellen Armbruster

T he young man in the orange jumpsuit held his face in his hands. The tattoo on one hand read "defiant."

"If only I'd been there with him—if only!" His shoulders began shaking as he buried his sobs, grieving the death of his father. There are few words that can bring comfort in moments like these.

As a prison chaplain, I often have the difficult responsibility of delivering news many prisoners dread: a loved one has died. I am always left raw from seeing how such news can rock a world, reducing the most hardened criminal to a puddle of devastation. It makes no difference whether the receiver is a drug addict or a serial killer—the reaction is usually the same. And my heart breaks with theirs every time.

Suffering far away from your loved ones is a cruel reality of prison life, but it runs both ways.

I also work as a Prison Fellowship program support specialist. I often find myself on the phone, listening to the tears of a mother, father, grandmother, or spouse as they share their

desperation for their loved one behind bars. Often, they are wondering where their loved one is, what he's going through, who she's locked up with, or what they did wrong. One mother told me, "When my son went to prison, I went to prison." Everyone wonders if they will ever get

beyond the pain.

Once a month, I also facilitate a program called Hope's Gate, a phone-in support group for families of those who are incarcerated. Though the voices from all across the country are different, the stories and pain are the same. On those calls, I realize

I am speaking with the "other victims." They are the ones who never get written about in newspapers—the family members who have watched their loved ones going downhill, been to countless court hearings, sunk their life savings into attorney fees or rehab programs, and who are raising the children incarcerated parents leave behind. These are the ones who will take another job to make ends meet in their old age. And while some may be partly to blame for their loved one's road to prison, they also suffer in this journey.

Being both a chaplain and program support specialist offers me a unique, dual perspective that few people get to have. I see how prisoners are hurting, but I also see their loved ones' pain. Both groups feel alone, but both groups can benefit from the comfort God offers. As a prison chaplain I tell people behind bars that the ground is



Inside and outside prison, prisoners and their families share similar feelings of grief and helplessness.

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Letters to the Editor

I'm currently serving a 25-year sentence and have been locked up since 2009. It's been a tough road with my family abandoning me and no contact with my children all this time either. ... I haven't seen or heard from my grandma since 2007 and one day I just wrote her a letter asking for help. I didn't know her house number—just her street and town. Well, I prayed and sent off that letter, and now my grandma found me. ... She'll be coming to see me soon as well as my aunt. God is so amazing.

—J.S., Florida

I wanted to let you know that you have helped me in a very special way. I have been locked up since 2010. I have two sons of whom I have not seen since my incarceration. Their mother and I have been separated before I came to prison, but this really severed any and all communication with her. I would write my kids every month with little if any response. I did not know what was going to become of my relationship with my kids. Being in prison is hard enough, but having kids and being in prison, well that's enough to break any grown man. I have been signing my kids up for Angel Tree since 2012. I



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thought that if nothing else at least I could be a part of their Christmas through Angel Tree. However, this hope started to fade quickly at the beginning of 2016. With no visits or letters from them I was starting to question God on why He would let this happen. ... On 2-11-16, I heard from God. When I got back to my dorm, I saw that I had mail. It was a letter from

my kids' mother along with two pictures of my sons, along with letters from each one of them. ... She is going to bring them to visit me as well. God used the loving, caring people at Angel Tree to reconcile a father to his children.

— B.M.

Once upon a time I would have tried to sell drugs to provide for my family ... [But God] has renewed my thinking, trusting Him for a gift for Timothy. My new family in Christ provided Him a gift. Not only did he receive a gift but his mother was told about the love of Christ ... Your benevolent actions demonstrate that people still care in a world I left some time ago. I'm inspired to stay in touch with my family and love them with the agape love Christ taught by how He lived His life.

— R.R.

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Victims Not Seen

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level at the foot of the cross—in God's eyes we have all messed up, and we all need His help. And as a program support specialist, I love being able to share the same message of forgiveness with the people who call in week after week, searching for hope, trying to find a way to work through the experience of having a loved one incarcerated.

If you find yourself wondering how you can support these under-recognized victims, here are a few suggestions:

1. Invite God into your journey and ask Him to show you what you need to own—not just what the court says, but what you truly need to accept responsibility for. Stop blaming others, and then give your situation and yourself to God. The Bible tells us that if we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us our sins (1 John 1:9). Remember, there's no reformation without transformation! (To learn more, read the article at the top of page 3).
2. Write to your loved one and tell them you're sorry—and mean it. Ask them to forgive you for your poor choices and actions. Remember, you can't be responsible for how they react, but you can be responsible for what you say and do.
3. Seek out Bible study groups and life-skills programs within your prison to

grow beyond your current state. If you wait until you get out, you'll never do it. You may need to speak with a chaplain or program manager to find out what is available to you.

4. Whether you are a Christian or not, surround yourself with people who share positive values. We become like the people around us, and it's important to associate with people who have their eyes set on living differently.

5. And finally, pray for your loved ones. God is able to do far greater things than we can imagine, and our prayers do not go unheard (Ephesians 3:20-21).

On a recent Hope's Gate call, I told the callers that they have the freedom to share or not, realizing many are hesitant because they fear judgment. In the last 15 minutes, we took prayer requests. From the hidden corners of the telephone connection, I heard a tearful voice that had not spoken before say, "Could you please pray for my grandson? I love him so very much and worry about him."

Another unseen victim, this grandmother has not given up on her grandson, separated from her by prison bars and poor choices. In those remaining moments, we all tapped into the One who could bring the answers and turn everything around! ■

Deliverance

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difficult decision immediately got him in trouble with his old gang, but a new future was opening up.

Arthur was released from solitary confinement in 2003. He immediately sought out the prison chaplain so he could learn more about his new faith. He also began to take college courses and studied the Bible day and night. Nothing could shake his determination to think in a positive way, not even when he was denied parole the first time.

"I had to learn that God's not concerned with happiness, but with His purpose being ful-



Photo provided by Prison Fellowship

The intensive, faith-based reentry unit at the Carol Vance Unit in Texas gave Arthur a positive environment to confront the past and prepare for the future.

missed out on before. He is the vice president of operations at a ventilation company, and he trains and manages a team of 15 to 20 people. At work, Arthur makes sure his team knows that he cares about them and what is going on in their lives. Recently, he even helped a colleague strengthen his marriage.

Arthur got married himself a few years ago. Together, he and his wife are helping to raise their niece. She was having trouble in school when she came into their Texas home, but now she is on the honor roll.

Sometimes Arthur still thinks about the past—the first frightening days on the streets, the things he did, and the endless hours in solitary. But in the end, he's grateful.

"I do regret things in the past and wish I could undo them," he says. "But that was a little boy that was lost, who had a lot of issues to deal with. Sitting in a cell was supposed to be the end of the road for me. Yet God pierced through the dark abyss and shed a ray of hope that sustained me."

Arthur also goes back into a prison near his home to help lead Bible study. For all the people still behind bars, he has a message: "Live your life on purpose. Make everything count. God will work it out for the good no matter the circumstances or situation you are in." ■

"I had to decide if I wanted to continue down the path of destruction or the path of deliverance."

filled," Arthur now recalls.

Five years later, he came up for parole again.

Reviewing his exemplary behavior, one member of the parole board noted, "You were the worst inmate in the beginning, and since 2003, you have an impeccable record. What happened?"

Arthur responded the only way he knew how: "Ma'am, I now believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior."

The parole board recommended that Arthur be transferred to an intensive Prison Fellowship reentry program. Seven days later, he was on his way to the Carol Vance Unit.

Dealing With the Past

Arthur made the most of what the program had to offer, even when it meant confronting the painful realities that had driven him to the streets in the first place. "I felt like I had been abandoned and thrown out like trash by my mother," he remembers. "And my father ...he preferred alcohol over me."

In 2011, Arthur walked out the gates a free man and completed the post-release phase of the reentry program.

"God took my mess and turned it into a miracle," Arthur says with joy.

Since his release, Arthur has worked on building the life he

A New Name, a New Family

by Zoe Erler

We knew his face long before he saw ours.

Three years ago, we saw his picture for the first time. An 18-month-old toddler with no known parents and no known name. From the other side of the world, we gave him a name. We became his parents. He became our son.

And three years later, when he was 4-and-a-half years old, we held him in our arms for the first time. The little boy we had known all along finally started getting to know us—his “Mommy” and “Papa.”

It is a story of adoption. It is a story of the lost being found. It is a story about God.

A Long Pursuit

You see, from the day my husband and I began the long journey to make a little boy from halfway across the world our son, I began to realize that adoption was just as much about us as it was him. We had pursued our son through hours of grueling paperwork, dozens of foster care fees, and countless prayers. In a similar way God, my Heavenly Father, had been pursuing me since before the world was made, long before I existed.

In the Psalms, a writer named David describes how God knew him long before he was even conceived: “You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclu-

sion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed” (Psalm 139: 15-16, NLT).

As the days and weeks passed, and unexpected legal and bureaucratic delays made the adoption of our son drag out, we were faced with the reality that this adoption would end up costing us more than we had anticipated. Every month that we could not bring him home was one more month of payments to our son’s foster care family—money we wished we could have been putting toward his college fund instead. Still, our son was worth it, and we were willing to pay whatever it took to have him well cared for in our absence.

Similarly, when God decided to make me His child, he did so at the ultimate cost to Himself; He adopted me at the expense of His Son’s life. The Bible says that we are all orphans, lost and alone without a Heavenly Father, and that God willingly sacrificed His own Son Jesus—His beloved child—to make orphans like you and me His dear sons and daughters.

In Romans 8:32, the Apostle Paul describes the lavishness of God’s love for us: “Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?”

God was willing to pay for our lives at the cost of His most pre-

cious possession—His Son. The cost my husband and I incurred to adopt our son cannot even begin to compare.

Adjusting to a New Reality

Now that our son is safely home, we are adjusting to life as a new family. Particularly, our son is adjusting to life in a new continent, culture, and climate. Some days, he is happy and content. Other days, he is confused, angry, and sad. Some days, he wraps his arms around me and whispers in my ear that he loves me. Other days, he turns away from me, ignores what I say, or openly disobeys me. And despite my many failures as a parent, I do my best to love him with firmness and kindness no matter how he is treating me.

Often in our relationship with God, we are fickle, too. Some days, we sidle up next to Him with praises on our lips. Other days, we’d rather have nothing to do with Him. Similar to what my son feels, coming into God’s family sometimes feels happy, sometimes scary, sometimes

Beginning to Belong

We all need to have a sense of belonging. God offers us a place in His family—as His adopted, fully loved and accepted children. If that’s a relationship you want to pursue, you can start with words from your heart.

Dear God, I feel lost and alone, like a child with no home. I want to be part of Your family. Thank You for Jesus’ sacrifice to pay the way for me to be adopted as Your child.

If you want to start a new life as a part of God’s family, *Inside Journal* wants to help. Through one of our partner organizations, you can receive a free correspondence Bible study, and an NIV Bible, if you don’t have access to one, by writing to “Beginning to Belong,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA, 20146-1790. The materials are available in English and Spanish.

confusing. Often He asks us to do things that seem foreign, strange, and difficult. Rather than obey Him, we turn away and do our own thing. And on our worst days, we even run full-speed away from Him or fight against Him, much the way my son often fights and pushes against me. Thankfully, the Father’s love is not dependent on our affection or attitude toward Him.

In fact, Paul says that “God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8, NLT).

Over and over again, the Bible talks about how much God cares for orphans. He is described as “a father to the fatherless” (Psalm 68:5). He cares for the literal orphans, those like my son with no known biological parents. But He cares for spiritual orphans as well—those like you and me who, through sin, have given up our relationship with our Heavenly Father. We are the “fatherless” who need to be adopted.

I’m so thankful that God chose to adopt me and give me a new name—His name—and a new family, the family of God. What about you? Do you need to be adopted, too? ■



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Colson Task Force Issues Report

WASHINGTON, D.C.—In late January, the Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections announced its recommendations to Congress and the president. Congress formed the task force in 2014 to look into challenges in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, especially overcrowding, and come up with policies to help solve them. The task force is named after Charles Colson, the disgraced “hatchet man” of the Nixon White House, who started Prison Fellowship in 1976 after serving a 7-month sentence.

Craig DeRoche, the senior vice president for advocacy and public policy at Prison Fellowship, who served on the task force, said, “We thank Congress for making criminal justice reform a priority and for its bipartisan collaboration, along with the president, on this important work. The task force upholds Chuck Colson’s and Prison Fellowship’s belief in the inherent value and dignity of each human life, which means that once people have paid their debt to society through a proportional punishment, they are capable of ... making significant contribution in their communities.”

The Task Force’s recommendations cover a lot of ground. Available in a full report called “Transforming Prison, Restoring Lives” at colson-taskforce.org, they fall into six major categories:

1. Reserve prison time for those convicted of the most serious crimes, making use of alternative sentencing in less serious cases.
2. Promote a culture of safety and rehabilitation in prisons.
3. Give prisoners incentives to complete programs that reduce

their risk of committing another crime.

4. Make use of policies that have been proven to help people succeed when they are released to probation or parole.
5. Make sure corrections agencies share the best ideas and are more transparent.
6. Use the money saved to improve programs, supervision, and treatment.

The Task Force’s recommendations for improving the

federal prison system are just that—recommendations. They don’t automatically become law or change policies in place now. But they are still important for two reasons: 1) They show that there more people are agreeing about the importance of making prisons safer and more effective; and 2) the recommendations are being shared with lawmakers, and advocacy groups are pushing to make them a reality in the future. It is estimated that if the recommendations were all put into place, the number of people in federal prisons would fall by

60,000 by 2024, helping with overcrowding and saving taxpayers \$5 billion.

The recommendations go farther than any laws Congress is considering right now, but some proposals, like the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, do embrace the task force’s main principles. DeRoche has publicly thanked members of Congress, including Rep. Goodlatte of Virginia and Sen. Grassley of Iowa, for their leadership in criminal justice bills that are making their way through the lawmaking branch of government. ■



Members of the Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections present their findings and recommendations at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., earlier this year.

Photo provided by Prison Fellowship

Behind the Angel Tag

A Q&A with Angel Tree's National Director by A.R. Quinn

Nationwide, one out of every 28 kids has a parent behind bars, resulting in many separated families. Since 1982 Angel Tree®, a Prison Fellowship program started by a former bank robber, has given parents an opportunity to restore and strengthen relationships with their children.

In 2015, more than 300,000 children were matched with local churches and organizations that gave children Christmas presents on behalf of parents behind bars. Each gift delivered to a child represents a complicated process—starting with incarcerated parents.

At every step of the process, Charles Rock, the national director of Angel Tree programs, makes sure the giant operation runs as smoothly as possible. Recently *Inside Journal* caught up with Charles to give our readers the inside scoop on how—and why—he does his unusual job.

IJ: Your job has a lot of moving parts. How would you sum it up?

Charles: I oversee all of the operations and program development for Angel Tree. To be successful in

my job is to have all of the eligible Angel Tree children assigned to a local church or organization.

IJ: What prepared you for this job?

Charles: I was with AOL previously for about 10 years. ... Around 2009 I started to feel a tug to do something that matters. Success at AOL was measured on money generated, advertising, page views, that sort of thing. That's fine. I wanted to do something else.

The only job that came up that I was interested in was to be the national director for Angel Tree. The head hunter thought I was out of my mind; the pay was much lower. But I never wanted anything else. I really had to trust and lean on God.

IJ: How did you find out about Angel Tree?

Charles: I was already familiar with Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship. I had read some of his books. As soon as I found out about the position, I immersed myself in learning what Angel Tree is all about: restoring and strengthening prisoners' families. I also became the coordinator for the Angel Tree program at

my church. I've been doing that for 5 years. That's given me a really good perspective on seeing the program from the ground and all the challenges associated with it—and the blessings as well.

IJ: It's only spring, but the deadline for Angel Tree applications will be here soon. Why so early?

Charles: The deadline is early because when you are receiving 200,000 applications with tons of data, it's very complex. The applications all go over to a partner who enters them into our system. Then we have to validate the data, figure out what's not there, what's needed, so we can match children with a church. Churches actually want to have the lists earlier. We have actually made the deadline as late as we possibly can for the prisoners and still have a good chance of assigning children to churches.

IJ: A moment ago you mentioned challenges. I understand that sometimes, even when a parent submits the application on time, a child might not receive a gift. Why?

Charles: There are several reasons a child might not receive a gift. It could be that the application was incomplete, or we lacked information that was needed to make a delivery. Sometimes the church cannot locate the family because

they have moved. Or the family doesn't want to participate for some reason. Occasionally there are not volunteers living close enough to serve the child, but last year, over 99 percent of all eligible Angel Tree children were assigned to a church or organization.

IJ: Why are only children and step-children eligible—not grandchildren?

Charles: In order to serve the parents, the step-parents, and their children effectively, we need to focus on our core mission. We don't have the resources to expand it beyond that.

IJ: Do you have kids, and do you ever imagine what would happen if you were incarcerated?

Charles: I have four kids, two boys and two girls. My kids are 16, 13, 11, and 8.

There was a time in my earlier life when I was waiting to get

caught, and I never was, and certainly I see a lot of me in this. It's very easy to make bad choices and have these things happen. It doesn't mean that you don't love your kids and that your kids don't love you. You should be able to keep a connection.

IJ: Angel Tree is a lot of work—for volunteers and for you. To be blunt, what's in it for you?

Charles: What's in it for us is we are blessed beyond description to get to do this. That might be hard to get, but it's true. I feel blessed because

I am a dad, too, and I get to connect parents who love their children and children who love their parents. I get to be a

pathway. That means a lot to me, and I know it means a lot to all the folks involved in Angel Tree. I have a particular calling to do that because I am a parent, and because I understand. I have a couple folks in my family who have been incarcerated, and they have families as well. ■



Connect with Your Child This Christmas!

What Is Angel Tree?

Maybe you've heard of Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree program, but you're not sure how it works. Angel Tree is a simple way to let your children know that you are thinking about them at Christmas.

Angel Tree works like this: Applications are shipped to the chaplains of participating prisons in early June. You fill out an application asking Angel Tree to give your child a gift from you at Christmas (you can suggest what kind of gift you think your child would like). Your chaplain collects all the applications and sends them to Angel Tree by the deadline. In the fall, Angel Tree volunteers call the person who takes care of your child to verify what gift your child would like to receive. Before Christmas, Angel Tree volunteers will buy and wrap the gift. The gift will be delivered to your child's home or given to your child at an Angel Tree Christmas party along with a presentation of the Gospel. Your child will be told that the gift is from you—their mom or dad who loves them! Plus, your brief, personal message to your child will be written on the gift tag.

A Gift from Your Heart to Theirs ...

This summer is the time to sign your children up to receive a Christmas present from you through Angel Tree. **Applications for Christmas 2016 must be postmarked by September 6, 2016.** Ask your chaplain or program coordinator for an application, and either the chaplain or program coordinator must submit it for you when you are done.

There are some important restrictions to the Angel Tree program, so please read carefully before filling out an application:

- 1) You **must** be the child(ren)'s father, mother, stepfather, or stepmother.
- 2) There **must not be a court order** restricting your contact with the child(ren) or their caregiver(s).
- 3) Your child(ren) must **live in the United States.**
- 4) Your child(ren) must be **18 years old or younger.**
- 5) The form must be filled out **completely and legibly.**
- 6) The form must be **signed.**
- 7) The form must be **postmarked by September 6, 2016.**

Start preparing now to sign up your children by contacting their caregiver to gather the most current information for your application.

Get an application and sign your kids up today! A special gift from you at Christmas will help them know that you love them, and it will connect them with a church that can come alongside your family in your absence. Best of all, it will give them an opportunity to experience the transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Angel Tree makes great efforts to serve every eligible child. Sometimes, however, if we are unable to locate your children's caregiver, if the caregiver refuses to participate, or if there are not enough Angel Tree volunteers in a local area, we may not be able to deliver gifts to your children.

If your facility is not signed up and has not received applications, your chaplain may contact **1-800-55-ANGEL** for more information on how to participate.



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