Dedicated Dad Pulled From the Wreckage

by Zoe S. Erler

I t was inevitable. It seemed Eric Cockream was destined for destruction. A father’s suicide. A mother’s disastrous remarriage. A passionate young man who gave in to the allure of ecstasy. One series of compromises after another. Finally, a kidnapping charge that carried with it a sentence of 15 years to life.

“My life was wrecked ... no spiritual connection. In the end, it was a joke. I was living under a mask, having issues.”

Leaving a wife and two small children behind, Eric was set to establish a legacy of destruction.

Until one day in 2000, six days into his stay at the county jail.

One Eighty

Coming off the elevator, Eric bumped into a man—a volunteer—who invited him to a Bible study that was taking place in a few minutes. Eric returned to his cell, with no intention of going anywhere near a Bible study. But he couldn’t stop thinking about it and says that from somewhere inside he felt almost physically pushed to walk down the hall to the Bible study.

There was an altar call, and Eric relinquished his life to Christ. He says, “I gave my life to Christ, not knowing what awaited.”

Over the next decade and a half, Eric toured the Michigan corrections system—learning to follow Christ in the various contexts of six different prisons, taking culinary classes, working in food service, tutoring other prisoners, and volunteering in the chaplain’s office.

Despite the length of his sentence and his frequent transfers, Eric’s connection to his family remained strong, thanks to one woman’s firm resolve, a father’s commitment, and the ministry of Angel Tree.

Although he and his wife Lynda divorced a few years after his incarceration, she made sure to bring their two children—Jessica (who was 7 when Eric went to prison) and Eric Jr. (who was 2)—to visit their father at least twice a month. Meanwhile, Eric did his part to stay connected from afar, recording audio-books for his kids and helping them with homework via mail.

And Angel Tree®, a program of Prison Fellowship that partners with local churches to deliver Christmas gifts and the Gospel message to children on behalf of their incarcerated parents (learn more on p. 3), played a significant role as well. Eric signed his kids up the first year he was incarcerated, and for 10 years after that.

“I always remember us getting gifts delivered to our house. It always felt like it was coming from my dad. My mom maybe couldn’t get us everything she wanted to. [It] filled a void,” Jessica, now 24, says.

Freedom for Good

Once a hell-bent prodigal, Eric has been welcomed home with open arms. He was

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How to Be There ... When You’re Not

by Rob Lohman

P rinson? I never thought I would end up there, especially 11 years into sobriety. But an out-of-character, impulsive reaction to life’s circumstances landed me in the unfamiliar legal system.

The sound of the judge’s gavel rang through the silent courtroom just moments before I was handcuffed and escorted through the doorway leading to the county jail. I was staring at five years in a strange, unwelcoming environment. To stay connected to them, I had to get creative. My children (ages 3 and 5 at the time) were unable to understand exactly why I disappeared from their lives, and needed to know I still loved them and cared for them.

Here are some creative, meaningful ways I managed to be there for my children even when I couldn’t be there physically. You can use them to be intentional with your own children during your incarceration. (Some of the programs listed may not be available in your facility).

1. Find out if your prison offers a Read to the Children program where you choose a book from the library, record yourself reading the book, and then mail a copy of the recording to your child. He or she can play the recording over and over again just to hear your voice.

   TURN to p. 4 for more tips on connecting with your children through books.

   My kids enjoyed this so much and said it really made them feel connected to me while I was gone.

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Thank you for being a blessing to my children through the Angel Tree ministry. It is through this that I am able to build a beautiful relationship with my children. Which was once broken is now restored. —Leesa N., California

I did not realize that Angel Tree and Prison Fellowship would go out of their way to get my kids what they were hoping for. I kind of envisioned them … contacting a church who would find a second-hand store and make a good effort. I had no idea my kids would be thanking me for thoughtful gifts that they really loved. —Steven M., California

My bunky and I read your Inside Journal® Spring 2016 issue together. We ran into your article about the Bible correspondence study and [Bible]. Both of us are constantly in trouble and are currently cellmates in the box. We both want to change and are tired of the same old. We both don’t know but one piece of paper!)

I am currently sitting back in Ad Seg because exactly one week ago yesterday I got woken up for last chow and while I was eating, someone walked up behind me and stabbed me approximately 10 times for reason unknown. I went unconscious after the first strike. I couldn’t tell you what the gentleman even looks like. Luckily the shaded was poorly made … I should have been dead. God most definitely has a different plan for me. But as sit here in Ad Seg alone, all I can think about is making my relationship stronger with God. I get the copy of “Inside Journal,” the one with the article of Billy the Kid on the front page. I saw the “Are you Lonely?” article on the inside page. I really want to know more about what it means to have a relationship with God.

—Walter F., Arkansas

Subscription Info
At Inside Journal®, we receive many letters each week from prisoners asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. We are grateful for the interest and support of our readers—however, because of limitations on our staff and budget, IJ is only available in bulk shipments to your chaplain, programming coordinator, or a volunteer who visits your facility. Chaplains, to set up these shipments for free, please contact our editorial staff at P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790 or insidejournal@ipfm.org.

Pulled from the Wreckage
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invited to work as a janitor at Kingdom Life, a church in Muskegon that was co-founded by a fellow prisoner. Nick Wagenmaker, the lead pastor of Kingdom Life, met and visited with Eric several times before he was released and was impressed by what he saw.

“He didn’t really seem institutionalized, didn’t have an antisocial aspect,” Nick says. “He had a calm presence about him. A lot of guys coming out are fidgety.” Nick has continued to be impressed with Eric, in his role as a janitor and as leader of the church’s men’s ministry, as well as his involvement with 70x7 Life Recovery, an outreach to former prisoners. “Eric is just one of the most gentle spirits I’ve ever met,” Nick says. “He loves people and loves relationships … He’s a detailed guy. Works with a very high quality.”

In addition to his work at the church, Eric spent much of his first year of freedom deepening his family relationships. The first weekend he was home, he was warmly embraced by family at his son’s graduation party. “When he did come home, it was almost like nothing happened,” says Jessica. “Almost like he’s been there the whole time.”

Jessica recently got engaged, and her fiancé made a point to ask Eric for her hand for marriage.

“I’m always remember us getting gifts delivered to our house. It always felt like it was coming from my dad.”

Once a hell-bent prodigal, Eric is now bent on staying faithful in the small things, serving as a leader in his church, and being a consistent presence in his kids’ lives.

“How to Be There
Continued from page 1
2. Be active in your child’s education. Contact their school (you might need to ask someone on the outside to do this for you) and ask them to send you their schoolwork a few weeks in advance so you can do their homework with them over the telephone. My son was so elated that he and I were looking at the exact same homework sheet at the same time.

3. Make personalized cards and letters for your child to simply remind them that you love them and miss them. Use encouraging words and even Scripture to inspire them to have hope in whatever they’re facing.

4. Create a certificate congratulating them on school graduations or special accomplishments in their life. They will hang them with pride knowing you cared enough to do something a little extra!

5. Develop crosswords, word searches, or mazes using words or silly phrases your family often used when you were all together. Children have fun filling these out, and it helps keep your family identity alive. (Hint: Make sure to put the answers on a separate piece of paper!)

6. Encourage your children to mail you drawings and pictures that you can hang up in your cell or dorm room.

7. Write an adventure book with your child’s favorite characters (maybe a stuffed animal they love or a family member you both love) that you can read together over the phone. It does not have to be anything fancy or elaborate. Keep it simple. The point is that you took the time to write a book just for them.

8. Try to make Christmas (or birthdays) extra special for them. If available in your facility, try to get connected through Angel Tree, who’ll help you provide Christmas gifts for your children through a local church or organization. (See the ad on page 2 for details). You could also ask a friend on the outside to get involved to help make this special. For instance, I asked some friends to go buy a puzzle, put it together, write a special message with Scripture on the back, break down the puzzle and send to my children for Christmas. My children were totally surprised and loved their gift.

9. Call as often as you can to keep the sound of your voice alive in their minds. ◼

Rob Lehman is an author, documentarian, and the founder of Lifted from the Rut, a ministry for people struggling with addiction.

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Photo by Robert Neumann

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GET TO KNOW YOUR DAD!

If you don’t know God as your Father, but would like to, you can begin a relationship with Him today.

The Bible explains that “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.” (Romans 3:23, NLT). Because of our sin, we can’t have a relationship with God without help. But God sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross to pay the debt our sin deserved. Because of what Jesus did, you can know the love of a Father—a perfect Father.

If you would like to begin to know Him but don’t know how, you can begin by praying this simple prayer:

“Dear God, I want to know You as my perfect Father. I know that my sin separates me from You. Thank You for sending Jesus to die the death that I deserved. I want to begin my relationship with You today. Please come into my life and help me know Your love in a personal way. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

To discover how to grow in your new relationship with your Heavenly Father, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study and request a free Bible, both available through one of our trusted partner organizations, by writing to “Get to Know Your Dad,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

ANGEL TREE®
A Program of Prison Fellowship

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 2017 must be postmarked by September 5, 2017. 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 5, 2017.

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 child’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.

Connect with Your Child This Christmas!

The Dad You Never Had
by Roger Williams

I may have a good memory of sweeping the sidewalk with my dad when I was about 4 years old. I say “I may,” because I don’t know if it is an actual memory or one I manufactured based on a grainy photo. My mom snapped a shot of me copy- ing my dad, even down to the candy cigarette to mimic his Marlboro! If it is a real memory, it is the only good one I have of him.

Broken Beginnings
I think my dad thought he loved us. Maybe he even did in some bizarre way. If he did, he did not show it well. He was mean. He did not provide for us. He did not show it well. He was in some bizarre way. If he did, maybe, because there was very little to miss.

In time, I came to see that my father was a broken man, raised in a broken and abusive family. His own father died in a mining accident when he was a young boy. From my perspective, he was a lost boy who grew up to be a lost man. This does not excuse the way he treated us, but it has made it easier for me to understand him.

Loved Like Jesus
Of course, some people have endured far worse fathers than I did. As a church pastor for the last 20 years, I have heard many stories of father-child relationships that made me weep tears of anger or frustration, and a few that have made me weep tears of joy and longing.

In the middle of trying to make sense of my story and the stories of others, something strange happened. In spite of the pain of a father who did not love well, I discov- ered a new path—a path to a love which drives out all other failures of love. It is the love of the one true Father: my Heavenly Father.

I learned that because of Jesus Christ, I am adopted as God’s own son. I was stunned when I first really understood the incredible words of Jesus in John 17:23. Jesus prays to His Father “that the world may know that You … loved them even as You loved Me.” “Even as” means “just like.” Here, He is praying to His Father about you and me. When we accept what Jesus did for us when He died on the cross, we receive real, radical, family love.

We are not just tolerated or put up with. God loves us with the same, fervent love He has for His Son Jesus. Think about this: if you trust in Jesus, God’s feelings for you are exactly His feelings for Jesus! His delight in you is the same as it is in Jesus! In fact, when God looks at you, He doesn’t see a criminal—he sees someone who is worthy and honorable. He sees a son or daughter. This is incredible but completely true!

The Greatest Dad
One of the ways I have come to understand God’s Father love for me is through being a father to my own children. When my oldest son was born, he had medi- cal problems and was hooked up to machines. My wife and I watched helplessly. Before he could do anything for us or give anything to us, I discovered something power- ful: that I deeply loved this child simply because he was … my child. Thankfully, my son is healthy and fine now. In fact, he recently gradu- ated from high school and is attending college. He—and his four siblings—still bring great delight to me. In all of this, I am often comforted by the fact that my Heavenly Father delights in me even more than I delight in my own children. He loves me not because of anything I could ever do for him, but simply because He is my Dad, and I am His son.

Maybe you had a wonderful dad. Maybe you didn’t. Either way, you can get to know a Father who will never let you down.

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A Program of Prison Fellowship

GET TO KNOW YOUR DAD!

Angel Tree® is a registered trademark of Prison Fellowship®

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.

Maybe you had a wonderful dad. Maybe you didn’t. Either way, you can get to know a Father who will never let you down.
Connecting With Your Child Through Books

by Zoe S. Erler

Think about your favorite book as a child. Can you remember how it made you giggle, or beg to have it read to you again? Was it the moment Goldilocks was caught by the three bears? Or when Peter Rabbit couldn’t figure out how to escape from Mr. McGregor’s garden? Whether books were an important part of your childhood or not, books with well-written stories have power both to unlock a child’s God-given imagination and create deep bonds between the child and the parent.

The reasons to read to your child are seemingly endless. According to the Children’s Literacy Foundation (CLiF), reading aloud to your child helps them build listening and language skills, vocabulary, memory, and a positive attitude toward themselves and others. It turns curious children into lifelong learners. And reading books with strong moral themes of right and wrong can help children imagine themselves as heroes and wrong can help children understand the consequences of their actions.

Reading Together Despite the Miles

Whether you are an avid reader or someone who has never finished a book, you can help your child develop a hunger for good stories and learn how to use good books to grow your relationship.

Here are some suggestions to help you get started:

• If you enjoyed reading books as a child, pick one that you remember well and ask your child’s caregiver to take your child to the library to get a copy of the book. During visits, phone calls, or through letters, you can discuss the book and what you each like about it.
• If you haven’t spent much of your life reading, take the opportunity while in prison to begin doing so. Take advantage of your prison library.
• Encourage your child to get a library card and visit the library as often as he or she can.
• If your prison offers a Reading to Children program, sign up to record yourself reading a book to your child. They will then mail the recording to your child to listen to while reading the book.
• Encourage your child’s caregiver to sign your child up for Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (www.imaginationlibrary.com), which mails free books to children in select areas at regular intervals.
• If books are available in the visiting room, make sure to read to your child during visits.
• In order to make the most of your reading aloud time during visitation, CLiF has provided the following specific tips:
  • Remember that anyone can “read a book.” Even if you aren’t the strongest reader, read what you can, or make up a story based on the pictures.
  • Get close. If you are allowed, sit close to your child. Make sure your child can touch and see the book. Let your child point to pictures and turn the pages. If your child wants to move around, or listen to one part over and over, that’s okay.
  • Use different voices. If there are different characters who speak in the book, come up with different voices for them. For instance, if it is a man speaking, make your voice deeper. If it is a woman, make it higher. If it is a lion, growl. If a mouse, squeak. Yawn when a character is tired.

The Legacy of an Angel

After only six years in prison, Mary Kay was released. She joined the staff of Prison Fellowship®, and was tasked with coming up with a Christmas project. She remembered the women in prison, and had an idea.

Mary Kay visited prisoners to find out what they would give their children if they had money, and she wrote the requests on some cut-out paper angels. Then she invited shoppers at a local mall to help provide the suggested gifts.

God had planted the seed in Mary Kay’s heart, and out of it grew Angel Tree™. To this day, churches and organizations partner with the program to provide Christmas gifts for children on behalf of their incarcerated parents. As a result, parents can feel they are doing something special for their children, and their children can feel remembered, valued, and loved.

Mary Kay Beard passed away in April 2016, but her mission to serve prisoners’ families lives on. To honor that legacy, Prison Fellowship named Mary Kay the 2016 Restorer of Hope, as one of five Charles Colson Hope Award honorees. Mary Kay’s daughter, Brenda, accepted the award on her mother’s behalf.

“When [Mom] went to prison there weren’t advocates fighting to preserve the family relationship,” Brenda wrote later, noting the shame she had felt as a prisoner’s daughter. “She knew [Angel Tree] was an opportunity to make the world a better place by sharing God’s Word.”

Remembering Founder of Angel Tree

by E.G. Andrews

In high school, Mary Kay Beard placed at the top of her high school graduating class. A few years down the road, she was on the FBI’s “Ten Most Wanted” list.

People would compare her to Bonnie Parker of the notorious duo Bonnie and Clyde. A native of Springfield, Missouri, Mary Kay was wanted for bank robberies in several states. The mafia wanted her dead for her association with the American Correctional Association. Mary Kay the 2016 Restorer of Hope, as one of five Charles Colson Hope Award honorees. Mary Kay’s daughter, Brenda, accepted the award on her mother’s behalf.

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