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A Bridge Through the Bars

by Jennifer Nelson

Richard Braceful remembers getting letters about his kids from his wife, Selena, during his incarceration. She would tell him how tightly they were holding on to their Christmas presents—even six months after the holiday.

Richard—now a Detroit, Michigan, pastor—smiles when he thinks about this, knowing how quickly most children get bored with a new toy. But these were more than ordinary Christmas toys.

Although he couldn't personally shop for Christmas gifts while in prison, Richard signed up to be part of Angel Tree (see ad on page 3 for full details about the program) during both of his stints in prison.

The presents communicated to his kids that he still cared



Photo by Glenn Triest

Richard reflects on how far he's come, from being behind bars and unable to see his six kids to watching them volunteer for Angel Tree after his release.

about them and thought about them even when he couldn't be there.

"The quality of the items showed love," says Selena.

The volunteers who bought the toys on Richard's behalf "took the time to give nice things to the children," she says. "I thank God for my

family having the opportunity to receive gifts from their dad even though he was not in the home."

Hearing his children's

reactions and seeing photos of them opening their gifts helped keep Richard going.

"I cannot tell you what that did for me emotionally, and encouraging me to keep my head up," he says.

Leaving behind six kids

Before prison, Richard had a dream job and a good relationship with his children, and he actively attended church.

But then he started working a lot. Eventually, he quit going to church and Bible study altogether. In his mid-20s, when life became stressful, he turned to alcohol and began experimenting with drugs. Soon, he felt like he needed to be high to get through the day.

When he didn't have the money to buy more drugs, Richard turned to armed robbery and carjacking. He

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4 Ways to Help Your Child Learn

by Grayson Pope

If you have kids, you probably know education is critical to their success in life. Though it may be difficult to get involved from where you are, as a dad, it's crucial you do so.

Studies show that kids with a father in prison are more

likely to have a hard time in school or even drop out. You can help your child avoid these struggles. Even from behind bars, you can have a positive impact on your child's learning. (And if you don't have kids, or your kids are grown, you can apply some of these same tips to grandkids, nieces, nephews,

or other young people you can influence.)

1. Set an example

Being involved starts with being a positive role model. "It's hard to be what you didn't see," says Dr. Greg Austen, former director of national programming at the National Fatherhood Initiative, an organization that encourages fathers to be involved, responsible, and committed.

Fathers' actions and behaviors heavily influence their children's views. Show your child the value of education by getting your GED, enrolling in classes available at your facility, or taking a correspondence course.

It doesn't matter if you haven't hit the books in the past. It's never too late to start. If your children know you're learning, too, it will show them that you value education in your life—not just in theirs.

Education doesn't have to be formal, either.

HOW TO GET—AND STAY—INVOLVED:

1. Set a positive example through your own self-improvement efforts.
2. Keep an open line of communication with caregivers and educators.
3. Be a spiritual leader and role model to your children.
4. Encourage your children and tell them they matter and have value.

Demonstrate the value of self-guided learning. Check out books from the library. Take notes. Read the same books as your child and discuss them through letters or during calls or visits.

2. Communicate with educators and caregivers

Stay informed about what your children are learning and how they're performing. Depending on the facility, you may be able to call in to parent-teacher conferences covering your child's academic

progress. You can request that your child's school send you copies of report cards or other important notices. Some schools might send you advance copies of your children's assignments so you can see what they're working on. If your children can send mail through a caregiver or family member, ask them to send recent schoolwork.

Communication goes both ways, too. If you hear that your child is struggling to learn or follow the rules at school, you

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halfpoint/istock

Even though you can't work on daily homework together, there are several great ways to support your child's education from behind bars.

Gifts with No Strings Attached

by John Henry

I'll never forget one January day in the penitentiary. My cellie was a big, tattooed, gangster-type guy. He was hard, with no love in him—or so I thought.

That day, I saw him sitting up on his bunk, crying. He had signed his kids up for Angel Tree, and some volunteers had brought them Christmas gifts in his name. Afterward, the volunteers sent my cellie a card with a picture of his kids, holding their gifts and smiling.

A simple card made that tough man break down crying.

He wondered why total strangers would care about his kids. What had he ever done to deserve that kind of love—that just showed up with no strings attached?

That was a pivotal point in my cellie's existence. His tough exterior melted. He started going to chapel

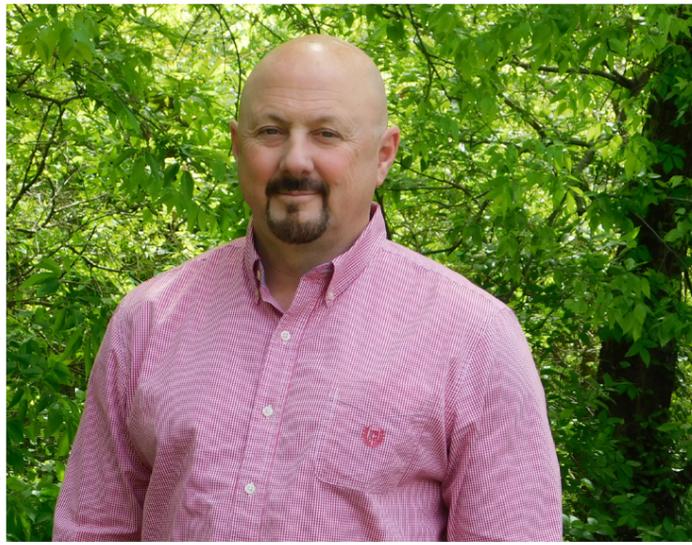


Photo by Prison Fellowship

and asking questions about Jesus. Eventually, he gave his life to God.

Since I've been out, I've volunteered to deliver Angel Tree gifts. I and a bunch of biker friends will go around on motorcycles with bags full of presents. We deliver gifts to kids in the name of their parent behind bars. I'll never get tired of the smile on those

children's faces when they rip off the wrapping paper and ask, "This is from my Daddy?"

When a child receives a gift from a loving parent, they accept it with joy and gratitude. They don't let fear, shame, or pride hold them back from a good thing—but sometimes we do, don't we? We could all learn a thing or two from those kids.

In this issue of Inside Journal, we're talking about how to receive God's love, which comes with no strings attached, and how we can share that love with the younger generation. On page 1, you'll read the true story of Richard Braceful, a dad who found out how much more valuable relationships are than money. You'll learn about how to help further your children's

education, even from behind bars (page 1), and how to establish a worthwhile legacy (page 3). Finally, you'll find all the info you need to sign up for Angel Tree (if you are the parent of an eligible child) on page 3 and receive a free Bible on page 4.

John Henry is a Prison Fellowship field director in Texas. ■

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

At Inside Journal® (IJ), 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@pfm.org.

Bridge Through Bars

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was charged with five violent crimes at the age of 29.

Selena was left alone to support six children, ranging from 2 to 9 years old, as her husband faced a five-year prison sentence.

When Richard found out about Angel Tree, he knew it would be one way to help his wife from a distance. After signing them up for the first time, he filled out the application again every year. Some Christmases, the Angel Tree gifts were the only presents the children received.

Angel Tree took some pressure off Selena. "There was stress from not being able to buy gifts," says Richard. "It relieved her of that. [She'd tell herself,] 'I know this is coming. I know

they'll have this. Even if it was just for a season.'"

The gifts helped him stay connected to his kids, especially when he was incarcerated seven hours from home and went without a visit from his family for a year and a half.

The separation ended when Richard was finally released. It was rough trying to become a daily part of the family again, and there were some struggles. But Richard told himself he was relying on God, and his biggest problems were behind him. He got a job and even pastored youth at his church.

But soon, stressors and disappointment became too much, and instead of truly turning to God, he once again turned to alcohol and drugs for relief. When he needed

money to fuel his addictions, he sometimes got it illegally.

Finally getting it right

Richard was charged with mail fraud in 2007 after he issued fraudulent unemployment checks from his workplace and pocketed some of the money. He went back to prison, but this time, he vowed to never walk away from God again.

Once again, Richard signed up for Angel Tree and sent gifts to his children who were still young enough to be eligible. His second incarceration was at a prison closer to home, which allowed his family to visit more. He also met volunteers from Prison Fellowship who helped reinforce the importance of relying on God for comfort and guidance every day.

Richard was released for the second time in 2011. After feeling led by God to become a pastor, he launched a church in Detroit in 2012.

He often shares the lessons he learned about humility, and clinging to God for the strength to face each day's challenges, no matter how big.

"I try to tell people, trying to live life without God is like trying to have someone work on your car [who] has never seen a car before," he says. "They are just guessing, trying to find their way to what's going on, and they have no clue."

His children, now ranging in age from 23 to 30, are paying it forward as they lead an Angel Tree program at Richard's church.

"It was a really beautiful thing," Richard says, "to have us come full circle." ■

Help Your Child

Continued from page 1

can encourage your child's caregiver to talk to the teacher and school counselor, explain the situation at home, and come up with positive ways to give your child extra support when needed.

3. Be a spiritual leader

Kids need guidance when they face struggles at school. They might not understand why they didn't make the football team, or they might struggle with a learning disability. Situations like these often lead to deeper conversations about what matters most—including spiritual things.

Tell your children that they matter—that they have value, abilities, and potential.

You can be a spiritual leader. You can do things like memorize an encouraging verse from the Bible—such as John 3:16 (for a free Bible, see ad on page 4)—with your children, or talk to them honestly about the difference God is making in your life. Your interest and investment in their spiritual life lets them know they can talk to you in difficult times.

Be careful to ensure that your relationship with your children's caregiver is as peaceful as possible so that

you keep communication lines open. Encourage the caregiver to bring your children to a church with a great youth program, so they can be influenced by others who might share your values. It takes humility to admit you need others to help guide your child's spiritual growth, but your child is worth it.

4. Guide and encourage your kids

Fathers play a unique and irreplaceable role in their children's lives. According to Dr. Austen, that role includes being a guide—helping children find their way in a world that can be disorienting, overwhelming, and discouraging.

With a parent in prison, your child's world may be especially challenging. Your child might be told that they will never amount to anything, or that they are destined to go to prison themselves. You can help by sending the opposite message. Tell your children that they matter—that they have value, abilities, and potential. If they know you believe in them, it will be easier for them to believe they can succeed.

Parenting from prison is hard. There are challenges at every turn, and regrets about the past might make you doubt whether you can help. But by choosing to be involved in your children's education today, you can show them that you want to be the involved, responsible, and committed father they deserve. And while you can't change your past, you can change your future—and you can help shape theirs. ■



Photo by Glenn Triest

Richard has learned valuable lessons in humility, which have helped his marriage and his ministry.

Like Father, Like Son?

by Johnathan Kana

I've only seen my dad cry a few times before. He's an emotional warrior who usually manages to hold it together when everything else is falling apart. But on that particular morning, standing across the street from the county courthouse where I had just been sentenced to prison, he was struggling to maintain his composure.

I was, too.

No one in our family had ever been to prison before, and both of us were terrified. Neither knew how to comfort the other.

"It's just another adventure," my dad offered, choking over his own words as he pulled me in for a final embrace. "It'll be over before you know it."

His tears loosened my own. For several bittersweet seconds, I was a little boy again, desperately clinging to my dad for protection from some pretend monster. Only this time, the monster out to get me was one I had created myself, and there was nothing he could do to shield me from it.

When he pulled away, his emotional warrior side returned. "We're going to get through this—together," he assured me. "Got it?" I nodded, wiping my face. "OK, then." He turned to lead the way. "Let's do this."

False father figures

That's the kind of father I grew up with—a faithful husband and dedicated provider who loved his children unconditionally, even when we failed to live up to his expectations. Father's Day was hard for me in prison because it reminded me how far I had fallen from his example.

But many of my fellow prisoners were haunted by memories of abuse and neglect when they thought about their dads. Some had to grow up far too soon when their fathers walked out on their families. Others ran away from home to escape

the terror of their fathers' presence. A few had never known their dads at all.

Father's Day was especially hard for prisoners with children of their own. I remember when one of the guys in my dorm returned from a long-awaited family visit, looking more depressed than I'd ever seen him before.

As it turned out, his oldest son had been suspended from school for bringing drugs onto campus. The police were involved, and now he was facing charges that would likely end his shot at a college football scholarship.

My friend was heartbroken and angry—not only with his son, but also with himself. Though he had tried to teach him otherwise, his son was following in his footsteps, just as he had followed in his dad's footsteps before him. Prison was becoming a family tradition, and he felt powerless to stop it.

Patterns of brokenness and wrongdoing do seem to pass through family generations, almost like an inheritance. But the Bible says all of us are broken, imperfect people by nature—regardless of where we come from or how we were raised. According to the Apostle Paul, we share a selfish, rebellious instinct that comes from our first father, Adam (Romans 5:12). Even the best of us, as Jesus taught in John 8:44, are capable of



kali9/iStock

Are we destined to be like our fathers? Are our kids going to end up like us? Or can we break the negative generational chains?

YOUR SUPPORTIVE FAMILY

My dad wrote and visited me often in prison, reminding me that I still had loving parents. No matter how difficult things got, I knew they would be there for me, guiding and supporting me.

God promises never to leave or forsake us, either. If you're ready to receive Him, you can begin with a simple prayer, like this:

Father God, You could disown me, but thankfully, Your Son died so that I could be part of Your family forever. Please, show me how to live as Your beloved child. Amen.

If you want to learn more about your heavenly Father and becoming part of His family, Inside Journal can connect you with a partner organization offering a free correspondence Bible study. Write to "Father Figure," c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. You can also get a free Inside Journal Bible, if you don't have one. For more information see the ad on page 4.

the worst acts. We all repeat the mistakes our earthly parents made before us—and theirs before them.

Finding the Father's love

I decided to share my history with my friend. I wanted him to understand that even if he had been a terrific dad, like mine was for me, his son would still make mistakes—perhaps even huge ones. He couldn't change the example he had set in the past, but if he was willing to confront his own wrongdoing now, he could still become the role model his son most needed.

The Bible says, "The Lord is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:13). Even though God, our perfect Father, ought to disown us, He chose instead to come alongside us in our

brokenness and show us a better way to live.

He did this by sending His own Son, Jesus, to become one of us. As both God and man, Jesus lived the perfect life none of us can, only to suffer the criminal's death we deserve on a Roman cross.

After three days, God proved that our debt of guilt was fully paid by raising Jesus from the dead. Now, anyone willing to turn to Him for forgiveness and follow after His example can receive a fresh start in life—and adoption as God's beloved child (Ephesians 1:5).

Father's Day in prison doesn't have to be an occasion for anger and sadness. Instead, it can be a time for new beginnings. Because of the heavenly Father's great love for us, we can break the cycle and start a new family tradition. ■

CONNECT WITH YOUR CHILD THIS CHRISTMAS!

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. Ask your chaplain or program coordinator for an application, and they will 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 4, 2018.

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 your information is incomplete/inaccurate, if local volunteers are unable to locate your children's caregiver, or if the caregiver refuses to participate, 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 (26435) for more information on how to participate.

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. 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. 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.

The Power of a Postcard

by E.G. Andrews

Former prisoner Marcus Bullock knows the lasting impact of a simple piece of mail from the outside. So, after his release, he set out to create an easier way for prisoners to receive messages from loved ones. He became the founder and CEO of Flikshop, a company that sends high-quality, security-friendly postcards to men and women in prison. He recently spoke with Inside Journal about family connection, second chances, and the power of a postcard.

IJ: Where did you get the idea for Flikshop?

MB: I was arrested about a week after my 15th birthday and spent eight years behind bars. While I was sitting in those cells, during mail call, my mom sent me tons of mail. She showed me so much love during a time when she could have opted not to ... It was love and adoration and consistency.

When I came home, it was hard for me to find a job, but I finally found one at a paint store. After that, my life started to soar a little. I started getting to travel, have new experiences, and make new friends. And I felt bad thinking about all those men I had left behind, knowing their aggravation of not even receiving one piece of mail while in there. Flikshop came out of that. I don't care what [kind of mail] it is; I'd want anything coming through that slot with my name on it,

telling me that someone out there knows that I exist.

IJ: How does Flikshop work?

MB: It's simple. Using their mobile device or computer, prisoners' loved ones are able to take a quick picture, type a message to go with it, and press send.

And for 99 cents, Flikshop prints it on a postcard. Just like someone can post to [online social media] about your little cousin's kindergarten graduation ... that same message goes on a postcard shipped to just about any detention center, jail, or correctional facility. So, it's a way that I hope people can stay connected just like my mom stayed connected to me during that time I was in prison.

IJ: Does Flikshop ship everywhere?

MB: Right now, we ship to about 2,200 prisons in all 50 states.

IJ: What is the long-term impact of this connection?

MB: Every single postcard ... that one message saying, "Daddy I love you, I miss you," is a moment that can be cherished in a prison cell, and experienced over and over again in that person's memory. It means so much to that proud father who otherwise wouldn't have much of a relationship with his daughter while he's behind bars.

Even if you get a postcard and it's a picture of someone's lunch, you know someone loved you enough to send you that photo. Like, "Hey, my brother/sister sent me this, and just look at this salad. I can't wait to have something like that when I get home." It creates a sense of hope and anticipation for release day, and how they want to succeed when they get out.

IJ: How did you learn to believe in your own potential?

MB: It helped to know that somebody on the outside believed in me. Being in an adult facility at such a young age, I had more failures on



Marcus went from prisoner to CEO, and is now using his incarceration experience to help other prisoners and their families.

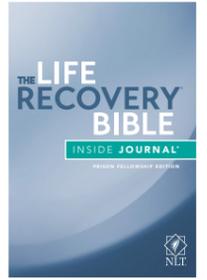
Photo by Jim Folliard

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- ✓ Whether you want English or Spanish*

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my résumé than diplomas. ... But I know I can make good choices. And that allows me to get up every single morning and say, "Marcus, try to run as fast as you can, even to the point of failure, because you'll learn from [failures] and be able to succeed later."

The thing is, no matter who you are, someone on the outside believes in you. There are people you don't even know, who believe in you. Knowing that would have changed the way I came home to live, even more than my family's support already did.

IJ: How have you seen Flikshop help families on the outside?

MB: Flikshop's social media pages are the place to go for prisoners' families. It's a safe haven. For so many families, it's still taboo to

talk about their brother, sister, husband, father, wife, mother, or whoever is in prison. So, these family members on the outside can go to our Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram pages and write about what they're going through. Someone else on the other side of the world might see that message or comment, and say, "Hey, I'm having the same problem. It would be great to connect with you and see how we can deal with it together." Flikshop is building a sense of community.

IJ: How can prisoners' families and friends find out more about Flikshop?

MB: Families and friends can visit our website, flikshop.com, or download the Flikshop application to their mobile device. ■

NEWS OF NOTE

Oregon Prisoners Walk to Give Christmas

A group of prisoners in Oregon has taken the joy of Christmas to a whole new level.

Last summer, dozens of men at Oregon State Correctional Institution and Two Rivers Correctional Institution wrote to loved ones on the outside. In their letters, they explained that Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree program has helped many incarcerated dads connect with their families in a special way at Christmas, when otherwise they might have felt very distant. For some, it helped to jumpstart fading family relationships.

These men value Angel Tree so highly that they want it to continue to benefit other families, and they were willing to go to great lengths to make sure it will.

The men at OCSI and TRCI planned an Angel Tree walk-a-thon, which they

coordinated through their chaplain with permission from the facility. They asked friends and family to donate a certain amount of money to Angel Tree for every mile they walked around the prison track.

Just by walking, the men raised more than \$8,000 for Angel Tree in 2017. Afterward, many celebrated their accomplishment with a special steak dinner, which they bought themselves.

Mark Hubbell, a field director for Prison Fellowship, attended the dinner and was handed a ceremonial oversized check, symbolizing funds that would directly support Angel Tree in Oregon. And the conversations he had with attendees were priceless.

"I sat down across from one man who told me about the first few years of incarceration," Hubbell recalls. "He felt like his family was slipping away

from him, year after year. But Angel Tree opened that door for communication and starting reconciliation."

Hubbell adds, "This fundraiser is something the guys really enjoy and throw themselves into. There were some people there who didn't even have young children anymore. But they remembered signing up their kids many years back, and they still believe in the mission of Angel Tree and want to make it happen for the other guy. They do it with a grateful heart ... One teacher here told me it's really been a boost of morale around the prison, all year round." ■

Second Chance Month Gains Momentum

While you're on the inside, perhaps preparing for a better life after release, people on the outside are banding together to break down barriers and create second-chance opportunities for

men and women returning from prison. In April, more than 170 organizations joined Prison Fellowship to celebrate Second Chance Month and recognize the potential of people with a criminal record.

On March 30, the White House issued a proclamation, signed by the president, declaring April 2018 as Second Chance Month. Several states, counties, and cities also declared their support of second chances.

Meanwhile, job fairs, "Second Chance Sunday" church services, and other activities raised awareness. Supporters participated in the Second Chance 5K in St. Paul, while Minnesota prisoners ran or walked in similar 5Ks on the yard, coordinated with the permission of the Minnesota DOC.

In the nation's capital, supporters of second chances gathered on a freezing cold day for Prison Fellowship's Road to Second Chances,

which featured a prayer walk, press conference, and a free resource fair. Walkers like Nicole were proud to brave the cold. "We're so excited to be here today," she said. "We're here because we believe there is hope for everyone." ■



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