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How a Struggling Single Mom Found True Riches

by A.R. Quinn

“I was never able to be just an innocent child,” says Michelle Payette.

Her father was an abusive man with legal troubles. Those troubles eventually drove Michelle and her family from Illinois, her birthplace, to the racetrack town of Saratoga Springs, New York. Soon after, her parents got divorced, and Michelle’s mother married a man who was a convicted felon, though Michelle didn’t know it until much later. He ran an automotive shop that kept two sets of books. Michelle grew up thinking that it wasn’t quite legal, but she figured that was just the way business was done.

Her life lacked stability. To top it off, her mother was depressed.

By the time she was 13, Michelle was spending her evenings in a bar, piling on



Photo by Veronica Huang

When Michelle was a kid, she tried to grow up too fast and wound up as a young mom in a bad marriage. Then the lure of nice things and the appearance of a successful life eventually led to a prison sentence—which finally opened her eyes to what really mattered.

makeup and pretending to be much older. She partied hard with the rock stars who came

through town. At 21, Michelle married an older man and had her first

child, a daughter. She settled into motherhood and worked for a salon. On the outside,

WHAT IS ANGEL TREE CAMPING?

An extension of the Prison Fellowship® Angel Tree® Christmas program, Angel Tree Camping® helps children ages 5 to 18 who have an incarcerated parent or stepparent to attend a Christian summer camp* on a scholarship.

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*Camps are not owned or operated by Prison Fellowship.

she had the appearance of success—a nice house, a car, a family. But her marriage was unhealthy, and when she got pregnant again, her husband didn’t want the baby.

Michelle ended that pregnancy, but the decision left her depressed—and she was told she’d be unable to conceive again.

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How to Find Your Passions Behind Bars

by Stacia Ray

You are so much more than just some prison ID number. You’re a unique person with gifts and talents. Using these talents in the form of a regular hobby can keep your mind sharp and help lower stress. But how do you even pursue your hobbies with limited resources?

Inside Journal reviewed research articles, blogs, and personal stories to create a list of tips on how to find your passion while incarcerated.

1. Remember your childhood. What activities brought

you joy when you were younger? Even those of us with unhealthy childhoods had hobbies and passions. Did you love to draw? Were you good at sports? Acting, writing, reading, playing an instrument? Think back to what gave you fulfillment as a very young child and find a way to recreate that as an adult. That might mean exercising in your cell, joining a prison music program, drawing every day, or starting a book club or theater group*.

2. Ask others to list your best qualities.

Find a few trusted friends and ask them what your strengths are. Then use those



Photo by ugde/GettyImages

answers to find your passion. If most of your friends agree you’re great at math, create your own Sudoku book or

offer to help tutor someone in math*. If most of your friends agree you’re a funny storyteller, start a journal or

write a screenplay or stand-up routine. The added bonus of getting feedback from friends is that you can use this information to improve yourself. If you’re told you have the gift of gab, ask yourself if you sometimes talk too much and could stand to work on your listening skills.

3. Find inspiration in others.

If you hear a song that touches your soul, ask yourself what it was about that song you loved so much. Was it the lyrics? Try poetry. Was it the sound of the instruments? Try finding books in the

Continued on page 2

Letters to the Editor

Kelly, Mississippi

I have been here for about a month. I have chosen to do the time I have to serve with God. I yearn to learn all I possibly can so when I return home to my family, I will be the mother and wife God wants me to be. I love my family, and I spend every day growing in God's Word. I am so thankful that God's love is ever-present. Thank you for the words of wisdom in Inside Journal, and I ask you to remember me and my family in your prayers.

Dear Kelly:

We will keep you in our prayers as you continue to grow in your relationship with God and

your family.

Fina, Arizona

I am serving a 11 ½ year sentence out of 14 years. All my life I have been a victim and also played a victim. I have lied so much I don't even know the truth anymore. I pray to God, and I know how much I need Him. I know I can't do this time without Him. I am fully ready to accept Him in my life. I just don't know how to do it.

Dear Fina:

To fully accept God into your life, start with prayer. Just talk to Him like you'd talk to a close friend. If you have a Bible, reading the Gospels, such as

Mark and John, and the book of Ephesians might also help you. God bless your journey!

Tamarr, Arizona

I have been inspired by the things I read in Inside Journal, and one day I hope to share my story to do the same for others. Without you sharing this newspaper, some of our institutionalized brothers and sisters would not be as blessed. It gives us hope. Thank you again and God bless.

Dear Tamarr:

With God's love and hope in your corner, you are already equipped to inspire those around you. Stay strong and keep the faith! ■

Find Your Passions Continued from page 1

prison library about writing composition or see if your facility offers music classes. Reading biographies and autobiographies is also helpful. There are some fascinating people in the world. If their talents impress you, try them out yourself. Look around at fellow prisoners who inspire you.

4. Think outside the box.

Just because you're in a prison cell doesn't mean you can't get creative. Find clever ways for using the items you're allowed. Check the commissary for items that might have unexpected purposes. Have you always loved to cook? Experiment with different items to create unique cuisine behind bars. (Inside Journal ran recipe articles in Spring 2019 and Fall 2019; see if your library or chaplain keeps old copies.) Are you artistic? Draw pictures or create cards as low-cost gifts for loved ones. Are you poetic? Try spoken word, rap, or even acrostic poetry, where you write a word or name vertically down the left side of the paper and then use each letter to

start a separate phrase going left to right.

5. Don't stop until you find your passion.

Like the old saying goes, you'll never know unless you try. Figure out what classes you're allowed to take. Find out which programs involve the fine arts. Ask about volunteer opportunities for mentoring, pen-pal letter writing, tutoring, and other services. Try a variety of activities and make a note of your reaction to each. If you experiment long enough, you'll eventually find the talents and gifts that make you tick. And when you find them, stick to them. Make a schedule if necessary. Consistency will help strengthen your skills and reduce your stress.

People who are incarcerated with limited resources are some of the most creative, inventive people around. That includes you. Your passions and talents are unique and priceless, so go find them, and serve your time well.

**Be sure to ask permission before starting any group and follow all your facility's rules and regulations. ■*

Subscription Info

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Single Mom Found Riches Continued from page 1

"I was convinced, even though I didn't really have a relationship with Christ, that God was punishing me," she remembers.

In too deep

Michelle's marriage fell apart after that. She fell back on wilder habits and went to the Bahamas with a younger man. She got pregnant with a son, and it felt like a miracle. But her relationship with this child's father was also unhealthy. It ended in a restraining order.

It was then, Michelle remembers, that her boss asked her to help him evade taxes. At the same time, under financial strain, Michelle started paying herself "advances" under the table and used the corporate card to pay bills. Deep down, she knew it was stealing, but she told herself she would catch up on her finances eventually.

"In hindsight, it was probably selfishness. I loved [our lifestyle]. It brought me comfort being [in my home]. It filled an empty space that I had," she says. "But in reality, it still didn't fill everything."

In 2008, Michelle started going to church. Soon, she didn't feel comfortable with what her boss was asking her to do, but she also didn't know how to tell him "no." So she simply stopped filing

the taxes, and that triggered a tax investigation.

Michelle laid her situation before Sue, a friend from church. Sue told her plainly, "Michelle, you've got to stop lying. There's an old saying, 'The truth will set you free.'"

Ready to be free from her web of lies, Michelle told the district attorney what she'd done. She was offered two to six years in state prison.

Living with integrity

"Everything changed the day I went into lock-up," says Michelle. The girl in the next cell was suffering through heroin withdrawal. To comfort her, Michelle, who despite going to church had not yet accepted Jesus into her life, started reading aloud from a Bible.

As she moved from one state prison to another, Michelle turned an empty closet into a Christian reading room and played the piano for chapel services.

In 2011, Michelle helped with the Angel Tree sign-ups at her facility, so that mothers could make sure their children received a Christmas gift. Michelle's daughter was already grown, but her son was 11. He received his first Angel Tree gift that year. He began going to church and would tell Michelle about Jesus during their phone calls.

"My son led me to that close, personal relationship [with Jesus Christ], and it was all due to him receiving

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that Angel Tree gift," she remembers.

Michelle went home on April 27, 2012, with \$40 and a bus ticket to her name.

As she got her life re-established, Michelle contacted Prison Fellowship and eventually became an Angel Tree volunteer. In 2017, she was hired as an Angel Tree program specialist

and was promoted to Angel Tree field director a year later. She now helps make sure that thousands of children just like hers get a Christmas gift and a message of love from Mom or Dad. It hasn't been easy, but Michelle has paid back nearly every penny that she owed, and last year, she bought her own home again. She has

moved past the lies that were part of her past. And though she might make less money than she did breaking the law, she doesn't mind.

"Everything I need is provided for," she says. "I'm paying taxes. I'm doing it legally. I got custody of my son back. And I feel richer today than I did back then." ■

Who Are You? Whose Are You?

by Stacia Ray

Throughout your life, you've been described by other people. You've been given different titles and identities, whether you liked them or not. When you're in prison, you get called Inmate. Before prison, you might have been called Store Manager. Or maybe Gang Leader, or Parolee, or Mom. Some people get titles based on rank. Others get titles based on reputation. But words like "addict" or "thief" describe how someone behaves, not who someone is.

So the big question becomes: Who even are you? Is your identity found in someone else's opinion of you? Or in how much money you make or your latest achievement? If that were true, your identity would change depending on the circumstances of the moment.

An unshakable identity

Thankfully, your most important identity isn't based on mood or circumstance. That identity is firm: You are God's creation.

Does God measure people based on how "good" they've



been lately? Does He like you more if you've been reading the Bible or going to chapel?

The answer is "no." He loves us with no strings attached. He says if we accept Him into our lives, then we are His children. Your identity as a child of God can't be stolen from you. It isn't earned by your actions or stripped away by your mistakes. It isn't based on what other people think of you. And God doesn't value you based on how well-behaved you were as a kid, or what crimes you've committed, or how hard you pray. You can be secure in your identity as a child of God in an insecure world.

Imagine the most loving parent. Would that parent stop loving their child if that child misbehaved? No. Sure, the parent would guide the child, teach the child, or discipline the child. But no matter how badly the kid messed up, the parent

would still love that child unconditionally. And God's love for us is even more perfect than the most loving parent we can imagine.

Sometimes, God's children focus too much on being "good," as if God will love them more if they try harder. But your identity doesn't come from how well you "perform" as a Christian. If you aren't yet good at talking to God through prayer or hearing from God through reading the Bible, you don't suddenly lose your identity as a child of God.

That being said, if you pray and read the Bible regularly, it will strengthen your relationship with the Lord. And it will bring you a better sense of spiritual discipline to lean into God's peace more easily. Just like a child grows up and matures, so does a child of God.

Not easier, but better

Let's get something straight. When you finally

ARE YOU GOOD ENOUGH?

How do you know if you're "good enough"?

In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God says, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." In Him, you are good enough! No need to earn God's love or to seek approval from others. Rest in the peace that God's grace is a free gift, and if you have accepted Jesus into your life as your savior, your identity as a child of God is solid. If you're not sure how to receive God's grace, start with this simple prayer:

"Dear God, please show me that Your grace is all I need. Help me stop trying to find my identity in others' opinions, or in how 'good' I'm being. Let me be content in who I am as Your child. Amen."

To discover how to follow Jesus, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations. Just write to "My Identity," c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. To learn more about free correspondence Bible courses, see offer on page 2.

identify yourself as a child of God, that does not mean you will now have an easy, trouble-free life.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say we'll have fewer problems or be more well-liked if we follow Jesus. In fact, Matthew 10:22 even says, "And all nations will hate you because you are my followers." And 1 Peter 4:12 says, "Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you."

But hold on—there's more to those verses! Matthew 10:22 continues, "But everyone who endures to the end will be saved." And 1 Peter 4:14 goes on to say, "If [people insult you] because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you."

The next time the world is trying to insult you or define you, just remember that you are a child of God. And that is all the identity you will ever need. ■

RECIPE CORNER

Prison Lasagna Supreme

(submitted by James Grindle, South Carolina)

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 cans of ravioli
- 1 can of mushrooms, drained and dried
- 1 spicy beef sausage, diced
- 1 small onion, diced
- 1 small green pepper, diced
- 8 slices of cheese
- 4 single-serving bags of Cheez-It crackers (or similar), crushed
- 2 packages of Captain's Wafers (or any saltine/soda crackers), optional

*Mix mushrooms, sausage, onion, and green pepper in bowl. Microwave on high for five minutes. Put a layer of ravioli in the bottom of a second bowl. Add several spoonfuls of mushroom mixture over ravioli. Next, sprinkle a bag of Cheez-Its and a half package of Captain's Waters. Then layer with sliced cheese. Continue the layering process until all ingredients are used. Finish with a final layer of sliced cheese and crushed Cheez-Its. Heat in microwave for 5-6 minutes or until cheese is melted. Let sit for a few minutes and enjoy.

*Be sure to comply with your facility's rules and regulations whenever cooking.

IDENTITY CHALLENGE:

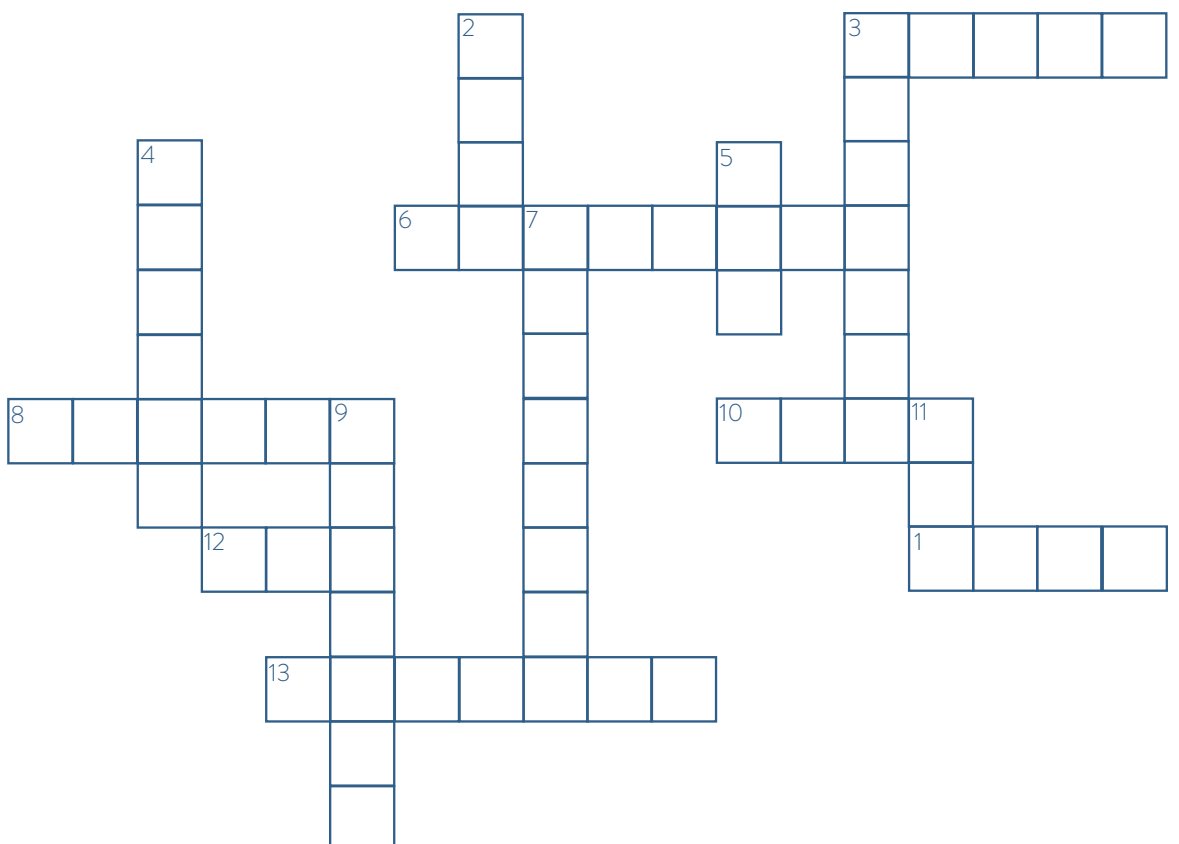
How quickly can you solve this crossword? Answers on p.4.

ACROSS:

- 1 *The Bourne Identity* actor: ___ Damon.
- 3 A ___ certificate is issued when you are born.
- 6 A booklet used to travel internationally.
- 8 Me, ___, and I
- 10 Opposite of "FOUND."
- 12 The male version of "DAUGHTER."
- 13 The identity card required to drive a car.

DOWN:

- 2 Popular credit card (not MasterCard).
- 3 Musicians John, Paul, George, and Ringo: The ___.
- 4 "Christian" literally means "of ___."
- 5 Opposite of "ME."
- 7 Clark Kent is the secret identity of ___.
- 9 2003 Disney Movie: ___ Nemo
- 11 Nickname for Thomas.



Finding Your Identity from the Inside Out

Many of our readers will be released at some point. But who will you be on the outside? Inside Journal spoke with Prison Fellowship Academy Reentry Manager Tom Lundquist about finding your identity after release: both your literal identity (ID cards and bank accounts) and your figurative identity (value and purpose).

Inside Journal: After being released, how can someone get a driver's license or other identifying documents?

Tom Lundquist: There's such a spectrum of how things work, depending on your conditions of release. Reentry services vary from county to county. Some counties have "wraparound" reentry services. Many prisons have transitional services. In Minnesota prisons, the DOC has transition coordinators that assist in obtaining IDs, birth certificates, and driver's licenses, even paying some fees for you. Before you do anything, first find out what your permissions are from your parole agents. Then, based on your situation, you

can start finding the right resources to help you.

IJ: What about opening a bank account and managing money after release?

TL: When someone is released from prison, the money that they earned in prison is put into an account. They'll have money on their books and be given a debit card. That card can be used right after release.

If you walk into a bank, you may get coaching there as far as how to open a bank account. For a credit card, you might have to start off with a bank credit card. That's OK in the beginning. It keeps your money all in one spot.

IJ: How can someone learn the latest technology on a smartphone and find the right apps, especially someone who has been incarcerated a long time?

TL: I've noticed that if newly released citizens don't have restrictions against a smartphone, they'll often get one the day after release. A smartphone opens up all sorts of options.

You may need coaching on how to use a smartphone. If your prison has a mentor,

that's a good way to get help. Otherwise, some cities have community organizations that will also walk you through things like how to get access to bus cards, which banks are best to open an account in. Once you get a smartphone, you'll have a lot more options, with banking apps, organizing apps, all kinds of helpful apps—even ride-share apps to help get to a job interview.

IJ: What tips can you share for the post-release job search?

TL: When it comes to finding work, if you have conditions that prevent you from accessing the internet, you'll need to find a workforce center. Those are places where you can go in and people will coach you on the internet. And it's all filtered, so you can't access things that are too personal or improper, but you can access email. Also, some states have good resources for finding felon-friendly jobs. In some states, the workforce centers have trained staff to assist formerly incarcerated men and women to find jobs that are not as impacted by their past felony convictions.

IJ: What else is helpful for finding your identity on the outside?

TL: A good faith community. People are much less at risk of relapse or returning to any kind of criminal activity if they find friendships in a church home, and especially a church that's welcoming to former prisoners. In prison, people often place their faith in Jesus and find their identity in Him. And that relationship with Jesus involves other people, to help anchor and deepen their values. Well, that's even more critical when you leave prison. In prison or jail, there aren't as many temptations, you have more time on your hands, and you can study a lot. But when you're released, you have a wider range of decisions to make, and you don't have the level of people keeping you in check. Without a network of support, it's a lot harder to stay on the right path. People who find community on the outside tend to do well. People who don't find community tend to struggle.

IJ: How long does the reentry process take?

TL: Figuring out who you are in Christ, or who you are as a person, takes time. Several former prisoners I worked with told me it took them a year after getting out to find out who they



Photo by malerapaso/Getty Images

are. In fact, research says it takes three years on average to get established. Sifting through the temptations, the freedoms, the stresses, and the faith piece can be a slow process of transformation. You might even flourish for a while but then start to drift. One man after his release started off attending a huge church but didn't find any friendships there. He wondered if simply attending church but not getting to know other people is what Christianity on the outside was supposed to look like. But then he found a smaller church with real friendships. This church was also very intentional in welcoming those who were incarcerated.

It says in 2 Chronicles 15:7, "But as for you, be strong and courageous, for your work will be rewarded." Be patient with yourself and include others in your reentry process. Pursue your identity, find your community, and build your support. ■

For help finding employment after your release, start with job search websites like [indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com) and [70millionjobs.com](https://www.70millionjobs.com). Also visit prisonfellowship.org/resources and scroll down to the section called "Preparing for Reentry." There, you will find a lot of resources, including tools on job searching and writing a resume, tips for family, books to check out, a national directory for reentry, and more. Be sure to follow all your release conditions and parole rules.

News + Notes

Former Prisoners Go Behind Bars—for Good

In fall 2019 in Tyler, Texas, some former prisoners went back behind bars. But this time, it was for a good cause. They joined Prison Fellowship and CityFest, an outreach of the Luis Palau Association, to bring a life-changing message—that in Christ, even the loneliest prison cell can be a place of freedom.

Prison Fellowship puts on Hope Events with inspiring speakers, musical guests, and other attractions at prisons all over the country. At this Hope Event™, StuntDudes, a team of professional athletes who put on live action sports shows, demonstrated their skills with ramps and BMX bikes. Incarcerated men came out on the yard, and incarcerated women stood nearby, behind a fence. Their voices joined together to cheer on the speakers

and to enjoy the music of Richard Andrew, a formerly incarcerated singer/songwriter.

Andrew Palau of CityFest delivered the Gospel message to the many prisoners who had gathered in the yard to listen. A "sea" of people came forward for prayer, Richard recalls. Jennifer Lowrey, Prison Fellowship's national director of Hope Events, added, "It was really powerful. You could just feel the Spirit there on the yard."

Michigan Finally Raises the Age

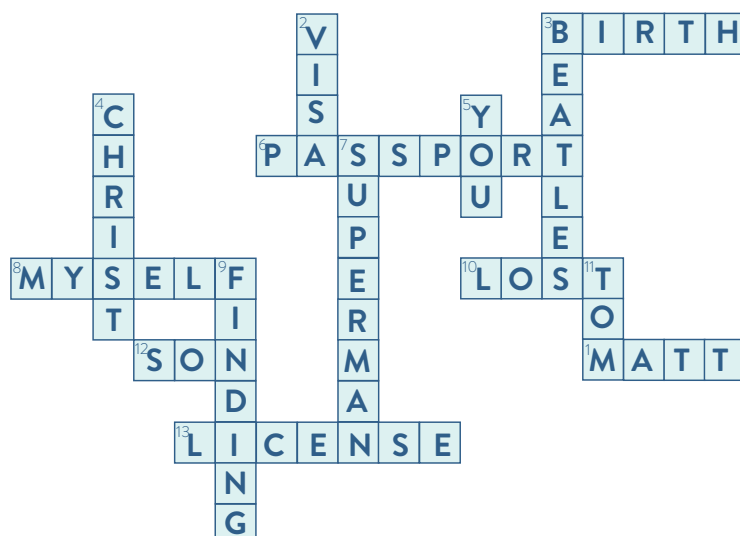
Come October 2021, 17-year-olds in Michigan will no longer automatically be treated as adults. Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed the bill in late October 2019. Once the law is in effect, Michigan will join most other states in treating 17-year-olds as juveniles.

In an opinion piece written before the bill was signed, Prison Fellowship's senior vice president of advocacy and public policy Craig DeRoche wrote, "Locking up 17-year-olds with adults is counterproductive and makes our neighborhoods less safe. Further, it disregards our young people's tremendous potential for change and redemption."

State Senator Sylvia Santana, D-Detroit, sponsored the bill. According to a report by Michigan Radio, she said, "What we need to do is educate individuals, not lock them up and throw away the key." The change could affect thousands of young people. The Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency found that within a span

of 10 years, more than 19,000 17-year-olds who committed crimes had been treated as adults in the state's criminal justice system. ■

Crossword: ANSWER KEY



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