

A Prisoner's Daughter Reconciles Children Back to Their Incarcerated Parents

Her childhood filled with disappointment, anger and self-doubt should have left her scarred for life. Instead, Scottie Barnes is on a mission to bring hope and healing to the heartbroken children of prison inmates.

SUNDAY AFTERNOONS WERE DIFFERENT for little Scottie. Instead of spending her free hours playing with neighborhood friends, reading a favorite storybook or enjoying a refreshing catnap, she was making memories of another kind. Her childhood recollections include barbed-wire fencing, heavy security gates and stern prison guards.

Throughout her young life, Scottie's father was in and out of jails and prisons all across the Southeast. Despite his bootlegging, gambling and drug dealing ways, Scottie's mother loved James "Babe" Pennell and was faithful to visit him every weekend. Scottie tagged along for many years. But the visits offered her no joy, no comfort and no peace.

"When I was little, I didn't understand why Mother cried all the way home and why we always left Daddy where he was," Scottie says. "By the time I was in seventh grade, I didn't want my friends to know where I went every Sunday of my life." There was never a visit when Scottie heard her father say the words, "I love you."

One Sunday morning Scottie noticed a new spring in her mother's step. This trip to the prison was going to be a happy one. Babe Pennell was being released. Scottie's mom would bring her husband home and, finally, they would be a real family.

But the simple dream she has would never come true. "When we got to the prison and Mother asked to see Daddy," Scottie recalls, "the guard said, 'I'm very sorry ma'am, but Mr. Pennell left with his wife just a few minutes ago.'" Scottie wouldn't see her father again until after the birth of her first child.

BEAUTY FROM ASHES "Isn't it just like God to take a life of pain and turn it into something beautiful?" Scottie Barnes told SpiritLed Woman.

Today, this 58-year-old wife, mother and grandmother is also the founder and president of Forgiven Ministry. She works tirelessly to bring the good news of God's love and forgiveness to those behind prison walls. And there's a special place in her heart for the children of these inmates. Scottie expresses great concern for their futures.

"Nearly 2 million American children under the age of 18 have an imprisoned parent," she says. "They're the most at-risk children in the world today. Many are trapped in a dangerous and destructive cycle that will most likely land them in a prison cell, too."

Because Scottie has walked in their shoes and understands the loneliness, shame and fear that accompany their sad circumstances, she wanted to do something to break the cycle. "These little children are so empty inside and they're using everything you can think of to fill that black hole," she says. "The thing we want to give them is not only the love of their earthly father, but the love of their Heavenly Father."

But how does one person undertake such a big mission? And who could ever part the Red Sea of red tape at the department of corrections?

With a burdened heart and a strong faith, Scottie contacted the warden of a prison in her home state of North Carolina.

She had visited there months before, sharing her testimony and ministering to the inmates. Now she wanted to go deeper and reach farther in hopes of bringing reconciliation between the hearts of these inmates and their children.

The warden agreed to her plan. It involved a day camp in which the children would be invited to spend quality time with their incarcerated parent. It would be an occasion filled with fun, forgiveness and eternal purpose.

A LITTLE BOY'S PRAYER As plans for what would become Forgiven Ministry began taking shape, in another part of the state, 7-year-old Isaiah had been praying a simple prayer every night for more than eight weeks. He wanted God to give him just one day with his daddy.

Knowing the prison system, with all its necessary rules and regulations, Isaiah's mother knew she'd have to prepare her brown-eyed little boy for the worst. "There's no way the prison will allow it," she told him.

The news didn't seem to discourage Isaiah. "Jesus can do anything," he replied.

With the prison warden's support and approval, Scottie began placing phone calls to the caregivers of almost 40 children. Each child would receive a personal invitation to an upcoming "One Day With God" camp.

Having never met Isaiah, and with no knowledge of his secret prayer, Scottie made the call to his house. She would later find out that his joyful reaction was to jump up and down on his bed shouting, "Jesus did it! Jesus did it! Jesus did it!"

In March of 2004, Isaiah and his father took part in the very first daylong camp event. The reaction from children, inmates, volunteers, caregivers and even prison guards was so positive that the concept spread like wildfire. Red tape began to disappear and steel doors opened for Scottie Barnes all across

the country.

ONE DAY WITH GOD Once the children arrive inside prison walls, loving volunteers meet them and help them get ready for their special day ahead. Each child is given a brightly colored T-shirt with a Scripture reference printed on the front. Jeremiah 29:11 is a promise that Scottie wants all these youngsters to remember: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (NIV).

After being reunited, parents and children share a morning filled with organized games and bonding activities. Then it’s off to lunch, where hot dogs, hamburgers and pizza are enjoyed amidst clowns, balloon sculptures and face painters.

The afternoon session includes a special craft project that grown-ups and kids tackle together. They build a lamp; complete with a beaded shade, as a reminder that Jesus can bring light to even the darkest places.

Praise and worship time comes next. This is followed by an entertaining and inspirational movie produced by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Soon it’s Scottie’s turn to share her own story about what it’s like to have a father in prison. Gently, she talks to the children as if they’re her very own. “How many of you have laid in bed at night and asked Jesus to help get your daddy out of prison?” she asks. “How many of you have wondered if your daddy loves you?”

Without fail, little hands go up and heads nod in agreement all across the room. Scottie continues with a message of Jesus Christ’s hope, salvation and unconditional love.

At the close of day, the children are given a precious opportunity to spend some intimate, one-on-one time with their fathers. Camp organizers and volunteers move to the far side

of the auditorium and many begin to pray silently for what's about to take place.

Fathers hold and rock their little girls. They grab their boys in bear hugs, as if to never let go. Tears begin to flow and words are carefully spoken.

"I'm sorry," they say to their children. "Will you forgive me?" The children listen intently as the healing words continue. "I'm in prison because I messed up," dads declare. "It's not your fault."

The men have been prepared and led to this point only after attending an in-depth seminar the day before. Conducted in partnership with a Virginia-based ministry called Great Dads, hours are spent promoting fatherhood and learning the principles of godly leadership.

During the seminar Scottie makes sure no one loses sight of the next day's purpose. "I don't care what it takes," she says. "You put your arms around those children and say, 'I love you.'"

Isaiah's father summed up his One Day With God experience this way: "It's all about the kids' hearts and what they've missed and what's been taken out of their lives," he said. "I hadn't spent a day with Isaiah in about six years. I asked for his forgiveness and that meant a lot to me. And for him to be able to forgive says a lot about him. It's wonderful."

A DAUGHTER'S MISSION Scottie likes to quote Hebrews 13:3: "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." This commandment compels her to move forward with the many projects of Forgiven Ministry. She's also encouraged to keep going because her story is a testament to God's amazing grace and faithfulness.

Although Scottie's father chose to abandon her as a little

girl, she never stopped praying for him. Through the years—as she married, had two daughters, ran a busy beauty salon and eventually became a grandmother—she couldn’t give up on her daddy.

One day, after 30 years of prayer, Scottie had an opportunity to invite her father to a local church revival. Miraculously, the visiting preacher was able to lead him in the sinner’s prayer. It was a dramatic conversion, but 62-year-old Babe Pennell would still have to pay for the crimes of his recent past.

Following a trial in which he was convicted of drug smuggling, Scottie’s father was sentenced, once again. This time, it would be 18 years in the Lexington, Kentucky, federal penitentiary.

Seriously ill with heart disease, Pennell ended up serving just a few months of that sentence. Before his death behind the prison walls, Scottie would finally hear those powerful words she’d been longing for her whole life. Her daddy said, “I love you.”

Reflecting back, Scottie says, “I wish there had been a camp when I was a little girl.” “But,” she continues, “out of my childhood circumstances, God has birthed a great vision.”

“I want to be a trailblazer for Christ,” she says with heartfelt passion. “I want this ministry to blaze a trail of reconciliation for these children and their parents. And I want to look back one day and see families walking that trail, hand in hand.”

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