Jarvis shuffles into the room and sits down in a high-backed swivel desk chair. He’s wearing a T-shirt and yellow jacket. He fiddles with his fingers in his lap.

Answers come easily to some questions.

“I love playing sports, having fun,” he says, with a hint of a smile. “Write poems, sing, dance. I love to draw.”

Ask the 16-year-old about his father, though, and the few words that do come take longer to make it to the surface.

“How many years,” he mumbles.

That’s the answer to a question about his father’s imprisonment.

Four years. An eternity, when your dad is in prison.

And why was he in jail?

“Taking an old woman’s purse … he did crazy stuff.”

(Because Jarvis is a minor, his real name is being withheld by the Independent-Mail.)

One out of every 40 children in the United States — and one in every eight black children — has a parent incarcerated, according to the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated. Numbers are hard to track because people are in and out of prison, and some prisoners don’t want to tell authorities they have children for fear of them being sent to foster care, said Robin Kimbrough-Melton, research professor with Clemson University’s Institute on Family & Neighborhood Life and director of a mentoring program called Building Dreams.

Building Dreams is a collaboration of the University’s family institute, the Youth Learning Institute, Clemson Extension, Angel Tree Ministries and community partners in Clarendon, Darlington, Pickens, Greenville and Sumter counties.

“Everything we have in terms of statistics is self-reported,” she said. “We know in the South Carolina Department of Corrections, about 78 percent of women on average will say they are mothers. About 62 percent of men say they’re fathers.”

Many times their children are living with grandparents or bouncing from relative to relative’s house.

Jarvis and his two brothers, one older and one younger, live with their mom.

“It’s hard for our mother to take care of us,” he said. “We have no daddy figure. She plays both roles.”

In the past few years groups such as Building Dreams and the Anderson nonprofit We Stand for Kids have begun to reach out to these children, in hopes of breaking the cycle.
“We recruit mentors to engage the children in a one-on-one nurturing relationship,” said the Rev. Michael Bond, executive director of We Stand for Kids. “We’re not asking our mentors to be a parent, but be a caring adult to help guide (these kids) in situations, a trusted friend.”

In addition to one-on-one time between individual children and their mentors, the group goes on local and regional field trips to skating rinks, colleges and the Atlanta Aquarium.

“It’s one of our ways to expose our children to something good, better than they see on a daily basis,” Mr. Bond said. “It’s something they can have if they choose.”

He knows firsthand how important mentors are in keeping kids of incarcerated parents out of trouble.

When Mr. Bond was growing up his father was imprisoned. He sought advice from the only source he could find: men on the streets of New Jersey, where he lived at the time. “The decisions that I made, I had no male guidance,” he said. “And the people who I got my counsel from were mostly men who were of the criminal element. There were coaches and teachers in my life, but their influence wasn’t as strong as the men who were on the street.”

At age 30, he himself was imprisoned — for possession of drugs. His sons were 13 and 5.

While he was incarcerated, his oldest son was “mentored” by men on the street, much as Mr. Bond had been in his youth. His younger son, however, found help from teachers. The eldest boy landed in jail, like his father and grandfather. The younger one is today a freshman at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Mr. Bond is a mentor for Jarvis and several other boys.

“He’s like the big brother I never had. Like the dad I never had,” Jarvis said. “When we do something wrong, he wants us to be a man and tell him. He’s always trying to tell us to go to college, make As and Bs.”

We Stand for Kids works with 41 Anderson County children, but that number isn’t close to the more than 500 area kids whose incarcerated parents signed them up for the Angel Tree Ministries Christmas list, Ms. Kimbrough-Melton said.

Building Dreams works with 137 children and has another 101 on a waiting list. As with all children, their level of success varies dramatically.

“It will vary depending on whether it’s a mom or it’s a dad incarcerated,” Ms. Kimbrough-Melton said. “It will vary depending on how much ongoing support the child has in the community. We’ve seen children who do very, very well. Academically they’re doing well, they’re good, contributing citizens. It’s directly tied to the level of support from adults in their lives.”

Other children in their charge struggle academically, which Ms. Kimbrough-Melton said isn’t surprising, as their parents often haven’t completed their educations themselves.

Breaking that cycle is yet another thing Building Dreams and We Stand for Kids are trying to do.

We Stand for Kids has tutoring and afterschool and summer programs for its kids, who range in age from 4 to 18.

Jarvis heard about We Stand for Kids through a friend at T.L. Hanna High School, where he is a junior. He began attending events sponsored by the group last summer and has stayed on. If he keeps his grades up, he wants to go into mechanical engineering — if he doesn’t become a basketball star, he says.

Mr. Bond, the watchful mentor, is sitting close by. He shakes his head and says, with a smile, “He’s going into mechanical engineering.”

After high school, Jarvis is considering Morehouse College, S.C. State University, Clemson University, Claflin University or the University of North Carolina.
“I love doing stuff with my hands, taking stuff apart and putting it back together,” he says.

Not all the kids who have participated in programs with We Stand for Kids in its five-year existence have stayed on the straight-and-narrow. Some have turned to gangs and drugs and other self-destructive behavior, according to Mr. Bond.

“The potential for gang affiliation, drug use, smoking pot (is high),” he said. “It’s a very easy thing to get involved with. I look for teaching moments before the fact, so when the time comes they can make the right decision.”

Ms. Kimbrough-Melton stressed that kids with incarcerated parents are kids just like any others; they simply have one extra life issue.

“They are kids who need to be loved and cared for, and we have an opportunity to do that in our community, and when we do that the chance for them to succeed is just as strong,” she said.

Jarvis has had several mentors during the four years his dad has been in prison. In his soft voice, he ticks off the things he has learned from his mentors: “Don’t get in trouble, do right things, stay in school, always take notes, treat people the way you want to be treated, don’t do crazy stuff to get kicked out of school.”

One day he hopes to become a mentor himself.

“(I want) to teach kids what’s right for them, and not what keeps them out of school and college.”