Reaching out to prisoners' children

"Building Dreams" mentor program offers surrogate

Associated Press

COLUMBIA—With their father in prison, 8-year-old twins Cody and Cory had only their mom to rely on. Then the family discovered a program that matched the boys with mentors.

Although Cody and Cory still must cope with the reality of a father behind bars, they know they each have an extra person to trust.

Building Dreams is a project of Clemson’s Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life. The one-year mentoring program focuses on 6-to-18-year-old children of incarcerated parents in Sumter, Clarendon, Darlington, Lee, Greenville and Pickens counties.

The program is one of dozens of similar projects across the country funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents estimates that as many as half of boys who have a parent behind bars will be jailed during their lifetime.

Cory and Cody's mother had to play both parenting roles for them and their older brother. She had to be there to offer advice and listen to her boys' dreams of becoming a professional football player and a movie producer.

Cory said having his dad away is "not that fun" for him and his brothers. "He calls, and I get to talk to him a lot," Cory said.

The boys' mentors are a married couple who own a horse ranch in Marietta.

Beth Bagwell, Pickens County site coordinator, said the couple uses the horses as facilitators and for therapeutic programs.

Like Cory and Cody, hundreds of thousands of children nationwide are left in single-parent and blended family homes as a result of imprisoned parents.

Twelve-year-old Trequetta, a seventh-grader, lives with her grandparents in Sumter, although her four younger siblings live with their mother. Trequetta's father is in prison, and although she speaks with him regularly, she said not having her father around doesn't bother her because her grandparents are like her real parents.

She said she wouldn't like to change her neighborhood if she could.

"The trash, violence and boys hanging around outside with nothing better to do — I'd like to change all that," Trequetta said.

Regina McBride, Building Dreams site coordinator for Sumter, said many of the city's children live in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

"Most of them are low-income homes, on housing assistance or live in housing projects," McBride said. "It's a lot of crime."

Thomas Budden is a mentor with Building Dreams. Budden was born and raised in Sumter but left at 23 to get away from drugs, prostitution and gangs.

He returned to his hometown nearly 20 years later to assist his elderly mother, only to find that the neighborhood had not changed.

Budden, 49, made a decision then that he would stay and try to make a difference in the lives of the children who had no way out. "We're trying to shed a little bit of light on these kids' situations and help those who don't have a father because he's locked up," he said.

McBride said prisoners' children are forced to take on adult responsibilities and grow up faster than other children.

"They don't have time to be kids," McBride said. "They don't have the opportunity to have a healthy childhood."