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## Ex-offenders struggle to stay connected to their kids

Submitted on August 1, 2008 - 3:31pm. [Cheryl S. Ntuny](#)



**Click on photo to enlarge or download:** David Jennings holds up a photograph of his daughter, Daviesha. Jennings was

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incarcerated for nine years and was released in May. SHFWire photo by Cheryl S. Ntumy

*Note: This is the first of two stories about ex-offenders in the Washington area.*

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WASHINGTON - David Jennings' daughter, Daviesha Jennings, just turned 13. Like any father, he said he is still trying to adjust to the transition; now she's concerned about things such as fashion and getting her hair done.

Jennings, 37, said he's asked Daviesha about boys, but she insists there's nothing to tell.

"I worry about her," he said, "running into a guy like me."

Jennings was a paralegal student at Howard University here when he was arrested May 27, 1999, two days after a botched robbery during which his accomplice was killed and two of the three intended robbery victims were injured. The initial charge of first-degree murder was later dropped, and he was charged with possession of a weapon during a crime of violence and conspiracy to rob. He was released on parole May 20 after serving nine years of a 20-year sentence.

His daughter lives in Bowie, Md., a D.C. suburb, with her mother and stepfather. Jennings saw her throughout his time in prison. He is luckier than most.

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, there are 201,628 inmates in federal prisons across the country, and as of mid-2008, there were 1,946 inmates in the D.C. jail. The District does not have a prison, however, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons is holding 7,333 convicted felons in prisons across the country. That can make it hard for prisoners to stay in touch with their families.

Many ex-offenders have strained relationships, if any, with their children. After years of incarceration, they struggle to readjust not only to society, but also to the families they left behind, according to the Rev. Yvonne Cooper, a volunteer chaplain at the D.C. jail.

Cooper's church, the Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, hosts the Missing Link Ministry, through which the congregation provides help with life skills and job preparation for ex-offenders in halfway houses.

"A lot of times, these people want to have a relationship with their children," Cooper said, "but they don't know how."

Hope House is a private organization that gives inmates the chance to spend time with their children. It hosts several camps during the summer, during which children spend every day with their fathers in prisons across the country. The children visit the prisons during the day, participate in art workshops and other activities with their fathers and then return to lodges where they sleep.

"It's been really liberating for a lot of our kids," said Hope House founder Carol Fennelly, to talk to other kids who are going through the same thing.

Fennelly said dealing with the families of ex-offenders is one of the most neglected areas of re-entry. While fathers are gone, the role of head of the family is usually taken over by mothers, Fennelly said. Once the fathers return, they are expected to take charge and be the breadwinners and disciplinarians.

"It's hard for our guys to live up these expectations," Fennelly said.

The organization also has a reading program. Brenda Marbury, Hope House's family outreach coordinator, takes a selection of children's books to the D.C. jail, where recordings are made of inmates reading the stories aloud. The tapes are sent to the children, cousins or siblings of the inmates.

There may be something to be said for turning to those in similar positions for help.

Cooper, an ex-offender herself - she spent eight months in jail on a bribery conviction - said former offenders are more effective when it comes to helping those who have just come out of prison. "We've been there, done that, so we know what the issues are," she said.

Housing is a major problem for many ex-offenders, especially if they can't return to their families. Most go into halfway houses, where they are monitored and aided in their search for employment.

After leaving Hope Village, a halfway house in D.C., Jennings moved to his mother's home in Southeast Washington. "It's an adjustment on both sides," he said.

His mother, Christine Jennings, 60, a retired transportation assistant for the U.S. Department of Transportation, said she has

no problem with the adjustment. "The first day he came home, and he went upstairs and came back down, it was like he never left," she said.

She volunteers with Head Start and said she's glad her only child is home, especially for his daughter's sake. "I want them to be closer," she said, "'cause it's been a long time."

During her son's incarceration, Christine Jennings said she was able to take her granddaughter to the prison in Rivers, N.C., and come back the same night. It was harder to see him when he was transferred to Petersburg, Va., she said, because they had to wait for hours at the bus station. "It was closer, it was just not convenient to get to," she said. "Those hours you spent just sitting and waiting. ... It was difficult."

Jennings said he sold marijuana and cocaine before his incarceration, but isn't sure why. "I don't think I ever needed, really, to sell drugs," he said. "My mom got me everything I wanted, but I still wanted my own stuff."

Jennings said he never took drugs, although the robbery was an attempt to steal drugs from a private residence. During the robbery, the female resident, who had been asleep, woke up, Jennings said. Before he and his accomplice could escape, the three other male residents arrived, and a shootout ensued.

The police came to Christine Jennings' home, claiming Jennings had killed his accomplice, she said. "They were singing that song, you know, 'What you gonna do when I come for you', from 'Cops,'" she said. "They were out back, out front, they were everywhere."

Jennings took a plea, avoiding a jury trial. He now works three jobs: cooking in the kitchen of Henry's, a restaurant in Fort Washington, Md.; temping with an agency doing jobs such as catering, and learning to drive tow trucks. He plans to start a vending machine business and go back to college.

He said ex-offenders shouldn't expect federal or private re-entry programs to produce jobs for them.

"They're going to put it before you," he said, "but you have to do the legwork."

Leonard Sipes, senior public affairs specialist for the D.C. **Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency**, said the agency offers a comprehensive array of supervision and accountability services for ex-offenders. The agency is a federally funded criminal justice organization that provides drug testing, mental health services and monitoring of ex-offenders.

"Offenders bring a wide array of issues to the table," said Sipes, citing drug abuse, rape and neglect as examples.

The agency provides drug treatment and performs mental health assessments, Sipes said. It also has four centers across D.C. where ex-offenders can obtain help with advancing their education.

"The research is abundantly clear," Sipes said. "We can reduce recidivism by 15 to 20 percent."

In 2007, the agency reported a recidivism rate of 12 percent for federal offenders.

Cooper said about seven to eight of every 10 people she has mentored have not committed new crimes.

She said it is necessary to let people know "we are our brothers' keeper." If people don't feel sympathy for ex-offenders, she said, at least they should care about living in a safer community.

Like many ex-offenders, Jennings said he still isn't completely comfortable around crowds. "I felt weird standing on the corner just now," he said. "I thought, everybody's moving and I'm standing still."

He said he doesn't frequent his old haunts, focuses on work and family and won't do anything that could land him back in prison.

"Nine years in there," he said, "you don't want to go back."

Jennings has dreams of visiting South Africa some day, after his 11-year parole is up. Around noon on a Thursday afternoon, he's indoors, curtains drawn, watching "Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." He doesn't start work for another four hours. Asked what he



**Click on photo to enlarge or download:** Childhood photographs of Daviesha Jennings and David Jennings rest on a table in his house. Jennings and his daughter participated in a summer camp organized to give inmates the chance to spend time with their children. SHFWire photo by Cheryl S. Ntuny

does during the day, he replied, "Stay in the house. Stay out of trouble."

Two tattoos run down the inside of his lower arms. The one on the right is an image of a teddy bear with his daughter's name across it. The other reads, in Chinese, "Victory or death."

He said it used to be his motto. "It is still now, but on a positive note."

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