

**A personal reflection on
Get on the Bus*
Father's Day to CCI, Tehachapi, CA
June 16, 2006**

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On Friday, June 16, 2006, a lone bus completed the three hour journey from Los Angeles to California Correctional Institution at Tehachapi, a 5,100 inmate huge sprawling state prison operated by the California Department of Corrections located in the mountains between the cities of Bakersfield and Mojave at about 4,000 feet elevation.

Nineteen very excited children bursting with anticipation bounded off the bus. They were accompanied by nine volunteers, one counselor, and mothers and guardians who had mixed emotions about the day. You see, the children were going to visit their fathers for Father's Day. Inside the prison the dads waited with equal anticipation. For some it would be a first time meeting, for some a joyful reunion and for one little boy a sad good bye.

Catholic Chaplain Deacon Clyde Davis, assisted by a local parish volunteer, Ms. Valerie Schultz welcomed the group. The local newspaper *Tehachapi News*, several television news crews and a documentary crew caught word and expression. Officers processed the group in with the utmost care, professionalism and speed that I have ever witnessed at any state institution.

Then the children boarded yet another bus for a short five minute ride to the visiting room. They were warmly welcomed by the visiting room officers where they once again waited for their dad's to be "processed" out to the visiting room. It was a long wait but finally, the door was unlocked and the fathers came into the visiting room.

First was a father who had never seen his eleven year old daughter. "Here comes your dad", said a volunteer. Suddenly the little girl who had been bouncing up and down with excitement was shy and hid behind a volunteer. The dad, equally nervous, kept his head to the floor the whole way across the room. When they looked at each other the resemblance was uncanny, the smile, the big happy eyes. (Two hours later they held hands and walked to lunch together.) Next came the rest of the dads to be reunited with their families with hugs, kisses and tears.

Last into the visiting room was the dad of a little girl who'd just celebrated her fourth birthday. Her mom told me that she misses her dad so much and cries for him every night, but when she saw him she just continued coloring her picture as if nothing fazed her and he'd never gone away.

I watched a young preteen boy and his dad weep through their entire visit, sorry for the past, hopeful for the future. His dad is an illegal immigrant and immediately after serving his time in California's state prison, will serve five years in a Federal Penitentiary and then be deported. I wondered if they would ever see each other again.

Each child had two photos taken with his/her dad, one to keep and one for their dads. They shared a special lunch, played games and walked in a secured green area outside the visiting room together. I looked on in amazement at the resilience and depth of emotions of the children. I looked at the mothers and guardians and thought about how brave they were. Regardless of their relationship with the children's fathers, they put their own feelings aside and put their children's needs first. I wondered if I could be so unselfish and so courageous if I was in their position. Every child needs and deserves to see their parent, no matter the setting. Their love is unconditional. They just love. At the end of the day what more is there?

Some fragile relationships were mended by the opportunity of this visit. Others may never change. The visit which lasted for about four hours was made possible with the cooperation of the California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation and the Warden and Staff at CCI, Tehachapi. For most of the children and families who participated it is the only visit they have with their father this year.

****Get on the Bus***, is sponsored by Women and Criminal Justice, to bring incarcerated parents and their children together for Mother's Day and for Father's Day. Get on the Bus operates entirely on donations. With the money raised they completely fund the visit, from the bus ride, to counselors for the children, to gifts from the mothers to the children, their food and they pay for the correctional officers at each prison. .

For more information or to volunteer or donate please visit <http://gotb.net>