

Bittersweet reunions

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Visits between children, mothers in prison 'overwhelming,' 'great'

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CORONA – Thirty children stepped inside the scruffy walls of a state prison yesterday to honor the people in their lives who may have disappointed them the most.

Their mothers.

At the sprawling California Institute for Women, sons and daughters reunited with their imprisoned parents for a Mother's Day celebration with a bittersweet edge.

Twelve-year-old Mercedes De Young of Lakeside and her half-sister, 10-year-old Racquel Le Blanc of El Cajon, saw their mom for the first time in at least two years.



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune
Junior Michele De Young, serving time at the California Institute for Women, hugged her daughters Racquel Le Blanc (right) and Mercedes De Young yesterday for the first time in at least two years. Their names are tattooed on her arms.

Clutching a girl on each arm, Junior Michele De Young said she's due to be released this summer and that it's not too soon to start making amends.

"I know I need to be the mother my children need me to be," said De Young, 33. "All the hurt and pain I caused them – they didn't deserve it."

The girls handed her homemade Mother's Day cards.

Similar visits unfolded at several other women's prisons across California yesterday as part of an annual event created a few years ago by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Four San Diego area children visited Corona as part of a daylong trip sponsored by Catholic Charities in San Diego and the University of San Diego. A busload of North County kids was scheduled to stop at a women's prison in Chowchilla.

In Corona, families packed a large visitation room for several hours to snap photos, play board games, down hot dogs and to try, often through tears, to soothe their deepest aches.

Nineteen-year-old Monique Gastelum of Hemet touched her mother for the first time in three years.

Said her mother, inmate Maria Gastelum: "It's overwhelming. It's unexplainable."

Said her daughter: "It's great."

Maria Gastelum won't be out of prison until 2015.

De Young's story is a common one. She landed behind bars more than two years ago, after she was convicted of armed robbery. She had been in and out of prison before, due to a string of drug-related convictions.

She knows her crimes aren't something her family will easily forgive, especially her younger daughter, Racquel.

"I understand if she's angry and hurt," De Young said. "I know there's not going to be trust in me overnight."

She's working to earn that trust. She's enrolled in a substance-abuse program and is learning to use publishing and accounting software so she'll be better prepared for life on the outside.

Her children have faith that when she says she wants to turn her life around, this time it will stick.

"It feels good to know that she's going to be OK," said Mercedes, a seventh-grader at Lakeside Middle School. "I tell her to just be confident. Just do better."



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune
Aided by her ex-husband, De Young held a keepsake from the Mother's Day visit. More than 17,000 kids under 18 have mothers in California's prison system.

Mercedes longs for the days when her mother would comb her long black hair before she went to school.

De Young misses hearing her girls chatter at home and having a refrigerator to keep what she wants. She also misses sitting on her mother's lap.

She doesn't blame anybody but herself for her mistakes. She chose this limited life – she sees that now. And if things are going to get better, well, that's on her shoulders, too.



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune
Mercedes De Young, 12, watched her half-sister Racquel Le Blanc, 10, play on the swings while visiting their mother, Junior Michele De Young (right).

“I'm going to be so square that the Pope will be triangle,” De Young tells her daughters.

Joining the girls on the visit were their grandmother, Betty Quinones, and De Young's ex-husband, Raphale Le Blanc, who works as a stand-up comedian. Both live in El Cajon.

“We love her and we have a really good feeling about her getting out this time,” said Le Blanc, who is Racquel's father.

Corona inmate Rebecca Navarro, 40, sat near a long row of vending machines and shared lunch with her daughter, Evangelina Navarro of Rialto. Rebecca Navarro, who also has another child, is due to be released in December, after more than a decade in and out of prison.

Navarro gave birth to Evangelina while incarcerated 12 years ago.

“I was never mother material. I didn't want to have her,” Navarro recalled. But now, she said, “I'm getting older and I want to be a mother to my children.”

According to the California Department of Corrections, more than 17,000 children younger than 18 have mothers in the prison system.

As the Mother's Day celebration wrapped up, several of the inmate moms did what any mom saying a long goodbye would do – clutched their kids, planted kisses, teared up.

De Young told her daughters to use the bathroom before climbing back on a bus for the ride home.

To her, it just seemed like one of those things moms do.

