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## Mother's Day at the CYA

### Children from elsewhere in state visit county correctional facility

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May 13, 2006

Forget the flowers and gifts. Young mothers at the county correctional facility wanted one thing for Mother's Day: a chance to see their children.

On Friday, Crystal De Leon of Bakersfield screamed when she saw her 2-year-old daughter, Alexia Chavez.

The joy of being reunited after six months apart, coupled with the fear that Alexia might not recognize her, overwhelmed the 19-year-old.

But when Alexia saw her mother she raised her small arms to De Leon, who picked her up and hugged her.

"I got, like, butterflies," said De Leon, who is in the facility on a first-degree murder conviction.

"It's hard to explain the feeling, but all the hope came running back. It's so easy to lose hope here, but then I remember I got a beautiful daughter and all that hope comes back."

De Leon was one of eight mothers at the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility near Camarillo who participated in the Get on the Bus event, which helps incarcerated women reunite with their children around the Mother's Day holiday.

The county correctional facility houses female wards from 18 to 25 years old from across the state.

Regular visits from families living in Northern and Central California can be difficult, said Catholic Chaplain Catherine Conneally-Salazar, who brought Get on the Bus to the facility three years ago.

To facilitate visits, churches and organizations provided money for gas, rental cars and bus fare for the children's guardians. One Oakland family also was able to stay at a motel the night before with donated money.

Churches across the state have been organizing Get on the Bus events for six years out of concern that many imprisoned mothers weren't seeing their children.

Typically, churches raise money in various cities to charter buses to prisons, Conneally-Salazar said.

The county correctional facility, however, raises money in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties to bring families here.

Some of the 18 wards have children at the county correctional facility. Ten families did not attend, for a

variety of reasons, including members who chose not to go and those who had already planned visits on Mother's Day.

When De Leon and the other mothers entered the event room, they saw tables decorated with balloons and handmade Mother's Day cards from parochial school students.

Children also had the opportunity to leave with free clothes, games and stuffed bears. Buzzy the Clown and a musician entertained them while volunteers painted their faces.

Although the event is for Mother's Day, it is just as important that children feel special, too, said Rosalinda P. Vint, chaplain aide. "The child should not suffer because the parent made a mistake," Vint said. "It's awesome to feel the kids are not being left behind."

Staff psychologist Lisa Barra remembers how somber Mother's Day would be at the county correctional facility before the Get on the Bus event.

"It was sad. They weren't being recognized as mothers," Barra said.

"This is important, but it's not enough."

Barra, along with prison staff and volunteers, said they are trying to make the prison system better address the needs of women, and the Mother's Day event is one part of that effort.

Barra said prison staff regularly talks with wards about the challenges of mothering from a distance.

The staff lets them know that in some instances babies might not recognize them or want to be with them, Barra said.

Also, some four months ago, the facility created a pre- and post-natal unit where mothers can be alone. The rooms have purple furniture and bedding.

Conneally-Salazar said she hopes that the Camarillo facility will have the money and interest one day to allow mothers to stay with their newborns at least a week. Currently, mothers deliver their babies at St. John's Regional Medical Center and the mothers give their newborns to relatives or to the state.

Valerie Lopez's mother and stepfather take care of her 15-month-old son, Angel.

They left at 2 a.m. from Merced County and Lopez, 17, said she was glad her family made the six-hour trip for Mother's Day.

"I think I would have felt bad, more emptier than I already feel, if I didn't have this," Lopez said.

Lopez, who said she entered the county correctional facility for fighting and associating with gangs, is up for parole in August.

She's eager for the moment where they can be together all day, something she hasn't been able to do since her son was just a few months old.

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