

Doing Our Time

Ever since my son was locked up, I've been fighting for him and for change.

By GRACE BAUER

My son's involvement with the juvenile justice system started with cigarettes. When he was 12 years old, Corey was suspended from school for smoking and having a lighter in his pocket. This suspension was the first of many, all related to smoking. I repeatedly asked the school for help and was repeatedly told they had no help to give.

Near the end of that school year, Corey had his first involvement with police. He shoplifted a pack of cigarettes. I went to the police station to find my son handcuffed and quiet and took him home. The probation officer told me that it wasn't a big deal and they would put him on unsupervised probation for six months. If he didn't have any problems he would be released.

By then I suspected that Corey was using marijuana and drinking and I asked the probation officer for guidance. He said we should get a counselor.

Acting Out His Grief

We were struggling to make ends meet and did not have health insurance but eventually I found someone who would see my son once a month. The counselor said Corey was grieving the death of his beloved grandmother, a nurse in the very prison system Corey would later spend time in. She had died just days before Corey's first suspension.

My mother's loss was especially hard on Corey because my mother was like a second mother to him. We lived in her house for the first few years after Corey was born, and when I was at work, she babysat. Plus, because Corey didn't have a dad around, my mom tried to fill that role. She even took him fishing. Later, when I married, she bought a home on the same piece of property we lived on. If my kids weren't happy with what I fixed for dinner, they'd go next door and get her gumbo.

When my mother died, I was in so much grief myself that I didn't do as much as I should have to help my children. My girls were OK to cry. But Corey was older and a boy and I think he felt that it wasn't OK for him to cry. Instead, he started acting out.

The counselor said that we needed to keep close tabs on Corey and ride it out. But now every school problem also became a legal problem.

A Steady Pace of Self-Destruction

Corey graduated to supervised probation for violating school rules and then he did 10 days in a local detention center meant to scare him straight. He soon backed up those 10 with another 10 and then 30 more. The local judge said "enough" and sent him to a group home. That group home was later closed for repeated violations after the death of a child. Corey did his time there but still he never received grief counseling. He came home quieter still but still breaking rules everywhere he went.

By then, I had come to see January 5, 1998, the day my mother died, as the "before" and "after" defining moment of our lives. In New Orleans, the mark of time became defined by Katrina, for the nation it was 9/11. Before his grandmother's death, Corey had been an honor roll student and we were very close. But 1998 through March 2001, Corey kept up a steady pace of self-destruction and took the sanity of our family with him.

My husband was embarrassed, and largely he left me alone to fight for Corey. I ran myself ragged trying to keep Corey involved in positive activities. I taught vacation bible school and had him help doing sports with younger kids. He played every sport our town had to offer. I slept outside his door and later on the floor in his room to keep him home at night.

But on March 15th, 2001, Corey and two other boys left school without permission and proceeded to get high. Two hours later the police arrested all three in the middle of Main Street for a variety of charges. The most serious was breaking into a truck and stealing a \$300 stereo.

Prison Bars, Prison Ways

On the day Corey was "adjudicated delinquent," I sat on the front steps of juvenile court and cried until the pastor of our church and my husband helped me to the car. I felt I had failed my son. I didn't know how to help him. I believed that Corey would now get help from someone who knew better. Looking back, I am stunned at how naive I was that day. The experts told me that my son would go to a program designed to help him get his life back on track and then he would come home and be better. Having trusted authority my whole life, I never even considered hiring an attorney.

On our first visit to see Corey, I knew I had made a terrible mistake. We found him in a prison, bruised and filthy. Razor wire fences, guards in military uniforms. For any of you who have ever set foot in a prison, you can understand when I say it was prison smells, prison bars and prison ways.

As bad as this place was, the worst was yet to come.

Stomped Ribs, Rape

After six weeks, Corey was shipped to the Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth in Louisiana, where we live. When visits were finally allowed weeks later, we drove five hours to see him. He had been stomped in the rib cage by a guard and his face had been held under water in a muddy ditch to impress upon him the

value of following the rules. He didn't attend school, his medical needs were neglected, he wasn't getting enough to eat. Unknown to me, a group of attorneys from a public interest law firm and the Department of Justice had filed a law suit against the state of Louisiana for the horrific conditions of confinement at Tallulah.

Later, another boy who was housed with my son told me that one time Corey was held down in a cell and raped by another youth, while the guards stood outside the cell and took bets on who would win.

During that first visit, I wondered how I could leave my son alone with these people for one more hour. I cried the entire trip home.

Crying Out for Help

I called his counselor at the facility, I called his PO, I called the judge in his case. I cried myself to sleep at night wondering what I had done wrong. Corey's two younger sisters walked around in a constant state of anxiety, not knowing when I would break into tears.

My friends and family thought sending Corey away was the best thing. No one could understand how bad this was or why it was all I cared about, all I talked about. Maybe, I thought, if I could find an attorney, I could help Corey.

My appointment with that first attorney is another moment that stands out for me even after all this time. The attorney said that though my son was being mistreated, abused and neglected—and he had no doubt this was the case—there was nothing I could do. He went on to tell me that my son would not come home in 90 days but instead would likely stay there until he was 18.

Desperate to Do Something

When my son was sentenced to a 90-day program within Tallulah, no one told us about the horrible conditions of that program, or the fact that it had a more than 90% dropout rate. They never told us that if our son failed out of that program he would be transferred to the general youth prison at Tallulah. Nor did anyone mention that once Corey was adjudicated a delinquent, his custody was automatically transferred to the state of Louisiana, and it was now up to them to decide what happened to him.

The lawyer told me that when my son was released at the age of 18, I might just as well buy him a bus ticket to the Angola State Penitentiary because that is where most of these kids end up. He told me he couldn't take my money because there was nothing he could do

For all his bad news, the lawyer's words changed my mindset about what was happening to my son. All along I had carried deep guilt for failing my child. But someone had just confirmed that something was terribly wrong with the system. Though I didn't have a clue where what to do, I knew I had to do something.

I Found My People

Eventually I found the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL), a group of attorneys that was suing the state for the conditions of detention. In September 2001, JJPL invited me to attend a gathering of families in New Orleans.

On a dreary rainy morning my husband and I found hundreds of families like us assembled, with a magnificent jazz band belting out mournful blues that I knew must be what my heart sounded like if anyone could have heard it. A Louisiana state senator yelled through a bullhorn that the state of Louisiana was failing our children miserably. If those of us gathered stood strong, he said, we could change it. I had found my people.

After that, I went to the JJPL director and asked him if he could help bring my son home by Christmas. He started to tell me about their limited capacity. I stopped him. I told him I would do anything to help him help Corey. I told him that my son would die in that institution if he didn't help.

Fears and Nightmares

He said he would see if he could get an attorney to represent Corey, and he did. On December 12th, my son was transferred from Tallulah to the local detention facility. In early spring of 2002, Corey was paroled back into my care, the first kid in my parish to ever be granted parole from state secure care. My son was coming home and we laughed for the first time in a long, long time.

But our journey wasn't over. Corey had never gotten help with the feelings that led him to trouble in the first place, and his time in detention had left scars.

Corey recounted the stories of those he felt he had left behind—the boys whose families could never visit because they were housed so far from home, or who didn't even have the money to pay the deposit required to use the telephone.

At night, Corey didn't sleep well and he was haunted by nightmares. We couldn't walk up to him without letting him know that we were coming. I had to call to him to wake him up because we could not touch him when he was sleeping without him striking out.

Backsliding

Corey attended every program that we put in place for his aftercare program, including mental health twice a month, anger management, drug treatment and school. By the time he was 17, he was prepared to graduate from high school, with a part-time job. The state decided he should be released from parole. We were excited to be done with this part of our lives. Unfortunately, when they released him they also took his mental health care with them. Without regular visits Corey began sliding back to his old ways.

In October 2003, at 17, Corey joined nearly 200,000 other kids charged as adults in this country. Twice over the next seven years he would spend time in jail for

burglary (the first time, after getting high with a friend, for trying to break into a Coke machine), and once for breaking his conditions of parole by smoking marijuana. He spent the majority of the time between 2003 and 2010 behind bars.

A Short Reprieve

When he was 23, my son came home for a year.

Every day was a struggle, but there was joy, too. We took family pictures during the summer. Not one day goes by that I don't smile at his smile in those photos, proudly displayed around my home, kept close in my wallet and whirling by on my screensaver. He was with us on Christmas 2010 and New Year's, as well, and I enjoyed every minute of his almost child-like joy.

But on Monday, January 10th, 2011, at 6:30 p.m., I received a call from a number I didn't recognize.

"Are you O.K.?" I said when I heard my son's voice.

He said, "Momma, I'm sorry."

Corey had been arrested for three counts of armed robbery and possession of a handgun by a convicted felon. Though I'd steeled myself for the worst, I never saw this coming. I was on the street walking my dogs and my knees just gave out and I lay there, tangled in the dog leashes. "No, this can't be right. My son would never pick up a gun and threaten another person. Some better explanation is coming," I thought.

Back In the System

But no better explanation came. When I am at my worst, I want to go to sleep and not wake up until the pain passes.

That day, after my son dropped his sister off at school, he went to Wal-Mart and purchased a Daisy Pellet Gun and in broad daylight robbed the pizza place where he had been working. (Later we found out the gun was not loaded.) An employee of the business saw him and his friend enter the restaurant from the rear entrance with masks on and called 911.

Corey and his friend then told the three employees to get down on the floor and turn over all the money, which they did. Then they walked out and headed to my car. A witness followed them, reporting their location to the 911 operator. They pulled over a few blocks away to take off their masks and clothes. The police pulled in right behind. The cash and gun were in plain sight on the driver's seat.

Anyone that cares enough to ask wants to know, "What does Corey say about this senseless act?" What he says doesn't make much sense, but I believe Corey was trying to put himself back into prison.

Too Much to Handle

When you're locked up, almost every choice is made for you, from when to get up to when to go to bed. I think being in Tallulah during those critical years when Corey was just passing from childhood to adolescence made it scary for Corey to come out and have to make choices for himself. I also believe that instead of seeing himself as a person with potential, his experiences made him see himself as a criminal, and so, when he was under pressure, that's how he acted.

Then there's the reality of just how hard it is to start your life again after prison.

In the few months before Corey committed armed robbery, he was working some part-time jobs, but he couldn't find any way to really support himself. Then my car, which Corey used, flooded in a bad rainstorm. Corey spent several days drying out the car, but the electronics started to go. Then he got a flat tire. He felt terrible that he didn't have the money even to fix the flat.

Right then, the state of Louisiana sent him a letter saying he hadn't met with his parole officer in a year. When he called the head of parole in Louisiana to explain that he had been seeing a parole officer in Maryland, she wouldn't even get on phone with him. Instead they said that if he wasn't in court in five days they would be putting out a warrant for his arrest.

I think that at 24, Corey felt like he needed to handle all these things without turning to me for help, but he didn't know how to handle them. I think he felt like that scared 13-year-old boy they locked up all those years ago, and he just gave up.

Judgment Day

In 2011, Corey stood before a judge in the state of Maryland where we now live.

My family and I stood with him, but it feels unreasonable to me that the adults in charge of his care when Corey first entered the system didn't stand beside him. The police, the PO and the judge from the state of Louisiana that allowed children to be sent away to brutal and inhumane state facilities should be accountable for the damage they inflicted. But when the court officers led Corey away, he went alone to begin doing his time, and we went someplace else to do our time, too.

There is not a person, family or community unaffected by the impact of this country's addiction to incarceration. When schools cut back on teachers, when libraries cut back their hours, when our communities go without, some of that money has gone to locking up young people.

In the years that Corey has spent confined I have given all I have to rebuild and create a place for families affected by this far-reaching system to come together and fight for change, so that our children are treated like children who need guidance, not like criminals who are beyond hope, and so that families are seen as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

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