

# Reunited & Forgiven

By Burl McCosh

*Relationships often fade and die in prison, especially between children and their incarcerated parents. Scottie Barnes and Forgiven Ministry are doing something about it.*

The young boy sat quietly on the North Carolina prison's gymnasium floor, leaning against his dad and munching on a chocolate bar. He nestled closer as his dad hugged him—each savoring the moment and trying hard not to cry. They talked quietly, oblivious to the scores of volunteers twenty feet away who held hands and silently prayed. "Amazing Grace" played softly in the background. Caught up in the moment, volunteers paused to wipe tears from their eyes.

Scattered in small clusters around the floor, seated at tables or huddled on chairs, the scene was much the same—dads taking a few quiet moments to pray with their children before saying goodbye and returning to their cells. Months or years might pass before they saw each other again. As if frozen in time, the memories of the day would be forever cherished.

It had been a fun-filled day with pizza, popcorn, a movie, tug-of-war, a magician and a famous basketball player—things that most prison inmates don't get to share with their children. Forgiven Ministry gives new meaning to the concept of "prison camp." Scottie Barnes and scores of volunteers conduct a prison ministry program she calls "One Day with God" camps. For one special day, this program changes the prison environment into a place of hope and reconciliation for inmates and their children. It gives imprisoned parents and their children a way to share their lives with each other, and more importantly, with Christ. For Scottie, those tender moments are the fruit of her passion and dedication.

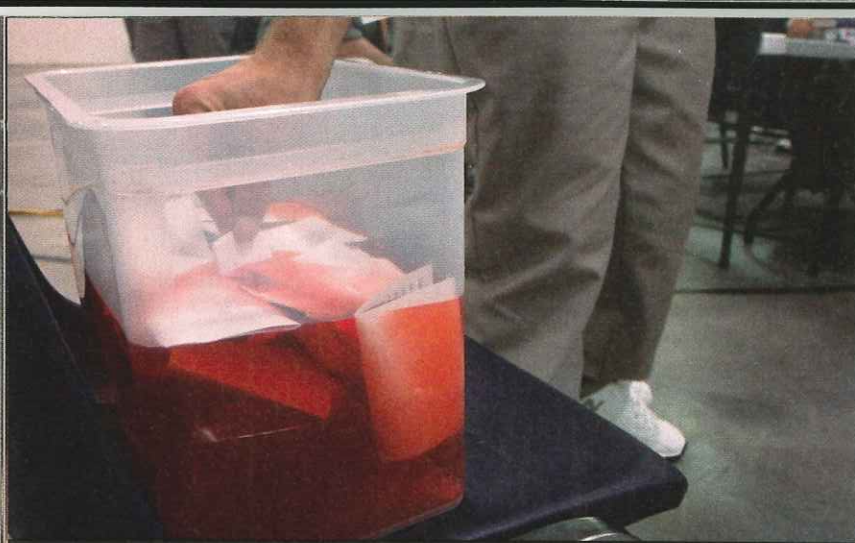
## Prison Scars

"It's what God has given me to do—helping children avoid the separation I endured," she explains. "My father was in and out of prison most of his adult life. I didn't have the childhood other kids had. I was embarrassed that he was behind bars. I felt ignored, rejected and unloved. My father never showed any emotional attachment to me. It hurt very deeply."

Prison is intended to punish criminals, but it inadvertently punishes children when a parent is imprisoned, she continued. "A lot of prisoners' children turn to crime because of the anger, bitterness and

*A young girl's eyes and tender touch toward her inmate dad express what words cannot at a prison camp in North Carolina.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN NELSON



*(Above left) Before camp begins, inmates drop their private lists of regrets into a bucket of colored water, symbolizing the blood of Christ. (Above right) Forgiven Ministries founder Scottie Barnes outside the Taylorsville prison. (Below) Inmates make precious memories with heartfelt hugs and a tug-of-war game with their children.*

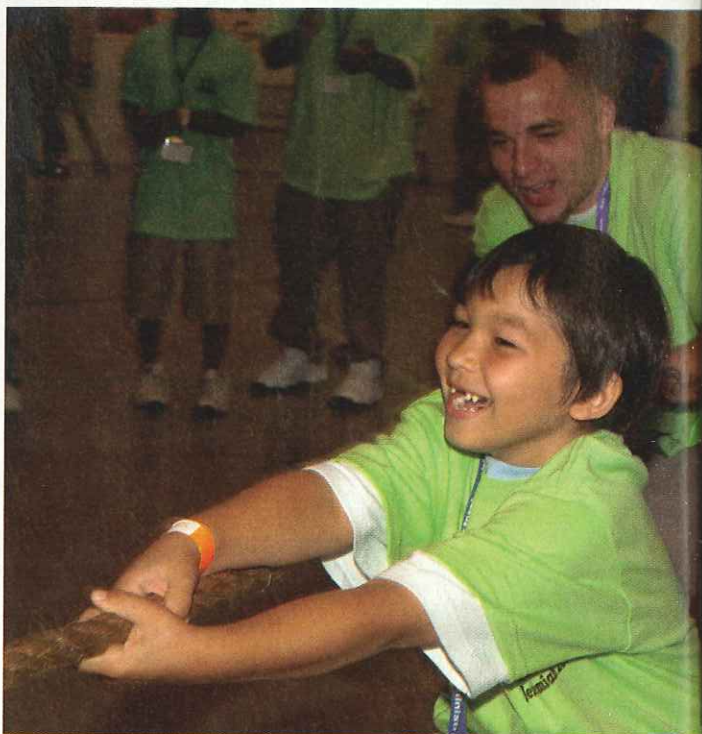
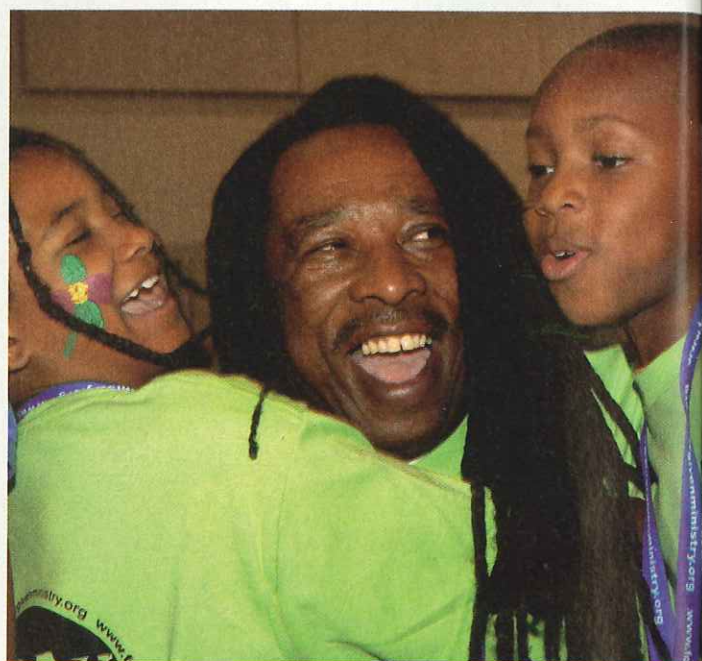
resentment that grows and festers within them. Officials estimate nearly 70% of inmates' children eventually go to prison themselves. It's like a rite of passage, with fathers seeing their sons in the same prison dining hall, wearing the inmate uniform, doing time just like them—caused by generations of hurt, resentment, convictions and shattered families. Reconciliation between parent and child is needed to break the cycle.”

“I used to go with my mother on weekly visits to see my father,” Scottie recalls. “Every Sunday, we made the three-hour drive to the prison. I was six years old when I realized he didn’t have any affection for me. He would sit at the table in the visitation room and keep looking at his watch—like he couldn’t wait for the two hours to be over.”

When her father was released from prison, the family moved to Tennessee, and Scottie started attending church. She listened intently one Sunday as the minister told his congregation how “Jesus can do anything.” Scottie wanted the prison scars her family had suffered to vanish, so she invited the minister to visit their home. “I figured if the minister talked with my daddy, everything would be okay,” she recalled. But when the minister knocked on the front door, Scottie’s father exited through the back door. The minister encouraged Scottie to never stop praying for her father’s salvation. Scottie’s father returned later that night. He admonished Scottie to never invite a minister to visit him again.

Within a few years, her father was found guilty of more crimes and was returned to prison. Scottie endured further years of rejection and heartache, eventually abandoning her efforts to maintain a relationship with him. “God must have chuckled that day,” she says. “It’s not God’s plan to write our parents out of our lives.”

Several years later, a heart attack and stroke left her father severely impaired. Scottie pleaded with God to do whatever it took to reach him, as she knew he didn’t have long to live. God had taken the bitterness from Scottie’s heart and replaced it with forgiveness. God touched her father’s heart as well. He accepted God’s forgiveness for his lifetime of crime, prayed for salvation, and was baptized. “I will always remember the moment when he leaned over to me and said ‘I love you,’” she said. Their relationship renewed, Scottie began making an 800-mile trip twice a month to visit her father in a federal prison.





(above) A CD player is given to every child so that they can listen to praise and worship music and recorded messages from their fathers.



"I didn't dwell on the past," she explained. "We now had a commonality in Christ." Her father died in prison a few months later.

### Restoring Relationships

It took nearly 48 years to prepare and equip Scottie for her ministry. Twelve years ago, she was operating a small hair salon in Taylorsville, North Carolina. "I had no intention of becoming involved in prison ministry," she remembers. "Then a prison chaplain asked me to share my testimony with the inmates. God used that to change my life." The prisoners responded to her message of how a little girl felt detached from her father, and what it was like to be reconciled with him. She was soon inundated with invitations to speak at churches and prisons throughout the state.

A turning point in her ministry came in 2002 during a trip to the Philippines. "I was visiting an orphanage when a young boy named Ezekiel came up to me and asked for prayer to help him find his father," she recalled. Scottie prayed with him and encouraged him to trust Jesus for the answer.

The next day, Scottie shared her testimony in a Philippine prison. An elderly inmate approached her and said, "Today I asked Jesus into my heart. I have a little boy. I want you to tell him I love him. His name is Ezekiel." Scottie hurried back to the orphanage to share the news with the young boy. She cradled him in her arms as he sobbed.

"God showed me what I was to do," says Scottie. "I sensed His plan was for me to reconcile and restore relationships of those impacted by crime and to help their families come to know Christ." She closed her business and began her ministry in prisons that year.

### In Their Daddy's House

Volunteer teams coordinate the children's visits with their inmate parents at each prison where a camp has been organized. Inmates spend Friday in an all-day session that teaches and encourages them to be Godly dads, despite their incarceration. The children are brought to the prison early on Saturday morning.

"They're giddy with anticipation. Many of these children have never had the opportunity to visit their dad in prison," Scottie explains. "Some have never known their dads. I tell them they're going to visit their daddy where he lives."

Outside the prison, the children are teamed with a mentor to answer questions and assist them. No one speaks of the crime that brought their dads to the institution. "All sin is equal at the foot of the cross," Scottie explains to the volunteers.

Meanwhile, inside the prison, the drab white uniform shirts are replaced with colorful t-shirts that match those given to the

**"It doesn't matter why my daddy is here. He's still my daddy and I love him."**



children. Though the children must pass through the prison's security measures like other visitors, the similarity ends there.

"In most correction facilities," Scottie explains, "visitation means sitting at a table in a large room and talking. Maybe you can hold hands across the table, but children can't sit on a parent's lap or hug except when they're ready to leave. There are no activities and no shared experiences. It's necessary for security reasons, but it's sterile. When we have our camp, there are games, snacks, prayer, crafts, music, a worship service and lunch. Sometimes we have a well-known athlete or other role model join us. The inmates have the chance to spend quality time with their kids. It's an opportunity for healing and forgiveness—for tears, bonding and reuniting."

Scottie quotes one young boy who said, "It doesn't matter why my daddy is here. He's still my daddy, and I love him. And I know he loves me, too." Scottie continues, "Incarceration doesn't have to diminish fatherhood. God can change lives behind prison bars just as much as in our churches."

Each child at the camp is provided

with a gift backpack filled with Christian books, games and materials. Each inmate gift-wraps a CD player that is placed inside the pack, so their child can listen to praise music and personally-recorded messages from him. The children and their dads build small night-lights together that symbolize Jesus as the light to the world. "It's a light for when you're missing your dad," Scottie tells them.

As the day comes to a tearful close, the children and their dads are led outside to a concrete courtyard. The walls are thick and gray, but the sky is deep blue and glorious. Handfuls of balloons are set free to soar high above the confinement. Scottie characterizes it as a way to say, "Thank you God for a day of reconciliation, love and forgiveness."

"There were many hearts healed of shame and guilt today for dads and children alike," Scottie says in summarizing the day. "They were excited that for the first time in their lives someone sincerely cared about them. They experienced God, and their lives will never be the same. It's worth whatever it costs."

Scottie prays every day for more

volunteers in every state. "The need is great, and it grows every year. New prisons are being built all the time. We've had prison administrators call us from all over the country, pleading for us to bring our camp to their prisons. They know how critical it is to stop the cycle. We're in six states now, and our heart is to be in every state prison in the country. But we need more volunteers to run the program," she said.

The ministry is totally dependent on donations and volunteers. It takes \$150 to support one child for the camp. \$7,500 will sponsor an entire event for 50 children and fathers, including the 150 trained volunteers that are essential to the camp's success.

To learn more about Scottie's life and ministry, please access her web site at [www.forgivenministry.org](http://www.forgivenministry.org). To make tax-deductible donations or to volunteer for camp ministry, please visit the web site or call 866-900-4463.

Scottie and her husband, Jack, live in Taylorsville, NC, where they attend East Taylorsville Baptist Church. Reverend Jamie Steele is their pastor.

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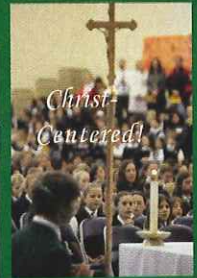
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