

Newsletter of the
**Travellers in Prison
Initiative**



VOICES FROM INSIDE CASTLEREA PRISON

We are Traveller men in Castlerea Prison. We are fathers, husbands, partners, sons. In this newsletter, we will tell you about the importance of our families and our culture. We will also tell you about the effects of discrimination on our family lives. We do not all have the same story. This newsletter tells some of our different stories. It also challenges some stereotypes about Traveller men.



EQUESTRIAN CENTRE AT CASTLEREA PRISON

On the 18th of October 2019 the Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality, David Stanton TD, “turned the sod” for the development of a new Horse Welfare Centre on grounds beside Castlerea Prison.

The centre will have stables for 10 horses and an arena. Prisoners will have the opportunity to learn practical skills that will help them to get jobs working with horses when they are released from prison.

Minister Stanton said “**Prisoners face many barriers to successful reintegration back into society and their communities. One of the final barriers or**

fences to be climbed is finding employment post release. This project, will give participants many positive benefits in terms of self – development, preparation for employment, positive impact and physical and mental wellbeing and these will be vital as they seek to turn their lives around after release”.

Governor Reilly said ‘**Finding and securing meaningful and purposeful work and activity after release is absolutely essential to give offenders real hope and the opportunity to have a different, better life for themselves and their families after prison”.**

The centre is expected to be finished in 6 months.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR FAMILIES AND OUR CULTURE

Family is number one

With Travellers, family is everything. Family is number one. You want the best for them. I'm proud of my family. I'm proud to be who I am.

Our sense of identity and pride in being a Traveller comes from our families. It's in our hearts. It's your life blood. It would be inside you. It's bred into you. You look around and you see, that's your name, your people, your pride.

Some of our hopes

I hope to get out of prison and not come back. I hope to have a job. I want to give my children what I didn't have – to go to school and college. They will be full-blown Travellers but educated Travellers.

Racism and our grandparents' stories

We've had a lot of racism in our times. It was hard when settled people told their children not to go around with Traveller children. It was hard going to school or other places and being called names.

Many of us would ask our parents why. Sometimes they'd tell us to ask our grandparents. We'd sit down with our grandparents and they told us stories. The stories helped us to understand why we were different. Their stories helped us to deal with racism. I loved sitting down with my grandparents. I still love to hear the stories. It reminds me of who I am, and the culture I was reared in.

Prison

Prison is not the hardest thing in the world. It's a walk in the park compared to what my wife and children have. They're doing the sentence. She's doing my work and her work. She can't take a break. She has worry, stress, less money.

But when you're in prison, you can feel helpless and that things are out of your control. That's an awful feeling. I was at a stage where I thought it was the end of the road. I was self-harming and taking drugs because I thought I couldn't change anything for my family. I felt like ending my life.



REMEMBERING THE STEPS WE HAVE TAKEN

When we end up in jail, it can be easy to forget all the steps we took to stay close to what we want in life. These are things some of us have done:

Giving up drugs

On the outside, I am totally clean. I stopped smoking cannabis for my family. I gave it up for my wife. I wanted to make her happy. Once she is alright, I am alright.

Moving from the town to the country

I moved from the town to the country because I knew my children would be in wrong company in the town.

Doing courses

When I was on probation, I did some Level 4 modules in a place probation ran: Computers, English, Art,

Cooking, Food Nutrition, Childcare. It kept me out of trouble. I put Childcare above everything else because I wanted to be a better father to my children. I could identify things I wasn't doing that kids need, like going down to eye level, or the sense of touch. It shows I can do it. It shows how much I love my children.

Asking for help

A lot of Traveller men don't open up. It's seen as a weakness to say that we feel down. So a lot of us lock away tears, grief, sadness, everything.

It takes courage to talk about hurt. It doesn't hurt your pride. It doesn't hurt your family. You need to stick your hand out and reach out for help.

I did that for my partner. I talked to my medic about my mental health problems and he linked me into Merchant's Quay. Before I knew it, I laid it all on the table how I was feeling. There was a weight lifted off my chest – it was like a car pressing down on my chest. She told me that I had my whole life ahead of me. I said I have a lot to lose, kids, partner. I started thinking about everything I had.

I always let my children know that it's OK to talk about things. The way I see it is if my son sees me asking for help, he might start from a younger age. And by the time he gets to my age, maybe he'll have a better way of opening up and speaking about it. That's one of the reasons why keeping the bonds with our family when we're in prison is very important.

STUDIES SHOW THAT
PEOPLE WITH
ADDICTIONS,
JUST LIKE ANY OTHER
HUMAN BEING,
RESPOND BETTER
TO BEING TREATED WITH
RESPECT AND DIGNITY,
RATHER THAN
BEING CAST OUT
AND SHAMED.

KEEPING FAMILY BONDS IN JAIL

Holding the bonds with our children and partners is very important for prisoners. If you're a father figure, you're there for life. Our ways of staying in connection are through visits, phonecalls and letters. These are the only ways of contact we have with the outside world - contact with home, with children, partners, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers.

Phone-calls

Prisoners get different amounts of phone-calls. One six-minute phone-call every day is Standard. You get two six-minute phone-calls a day if you're on Enhanced. A twelve-minute phone-call can mean the world to you. Phone-calls and visits are reduced as punishment. That means our families get punished as well. If there's something going on outside, like a death in the family, you can get a compassion call.

For some of us, six minutes is plenty of time, just to know if they're alright. For most of us, especially those of us with children, six minutes is too short.

A good phone-call

Sometimes, the time goes quickly if you're having a good ol' chat. A good phone-call is hard to explain. When someone laughs, that's a good phone-call. It could be something the children did at home. It

could be something simple or stupid, but a good phone-call is a good phone-call and it puts you in a good ol' mood.

I try to be joyful on the phone. Put in a laugh and joke. It's nice to be nice to your children. At least you know that they are happy for the rest of the evening.

Talking to our children on the phone

Everybody has a different system for their phone-calls.

I make sure I talk to all my children. That's very important. To let them know that you're thinking about them and that you love them. That's very important to them. They want to hear the sound of their daddy's voice.

It's for them to know that I'm still part of their life. I'm still inquiring about what they like. I'm in prison but I'm still there. And that's very important to me.

When you've got young children, they're watching all those American programs and they're seeing violence in prisons. So when you're able to have a normal conversation with them, you're kind of reassuring them that you're OK. You're not doing it rough. You're not doing it hard. That's very important for their mental health as well as your own mental health.

Visits

With visits, you're face to face. You have extra time to talk to them. But it's not always easy for families to get to the prison. Some have to travel long distances to get here.

I have respect for anyone who comes in to see me. Wife, children, and sometimes my mother, father, sisters, brothers.

DISCRIMINATION GETS IN THE WAY OF OUR HOPES AND DREAMS

Sometimes during a visit I hit a rock wall. My little girl is all questions about when I'm coming home. She asks questions I can't answer because I don't know what to say. I say, "I'm working packing the lorries for Santa. And I was bould". She asks, "What are you making?" But she's full of life! Every time she comes in, she has different questions.

Our visits are precious. But some of us worry that visiting can make prison normal for our children.

After the visit

The hardest part of the visit is saying good-bye.

When the officer says, "Time's up!" reality kicks in. Oh believe me, reality kicks in.

You give them a hug. You see them walking away. And you have to go back into your cell. You put on a brave face. Deep down you are breaking. Deep inside you are hurt. Your mind races. Is she going to be alright? Is my child going to be alright? I put on my happy face but it's killing me inside.

You try to deal with it the best you can. Some of us go out for fresh air or for a lap on the yard. Some of us try to get out to the gym. Or it can be good to talk to a close friend.

Digging deep

In prison, you have to dig deep. Hold your head up and don't go down. Hope is all you have in prison. Hope is a very big thing. Whether you're doing six months or a long time, you try to hold on to the hope that everything will be okay and my family is okay.

Keeping in contact with family is the biggest thing, with a partner, with children, with love. They keep you going in these places.

Discrimination and depression are major issues. When you're a Traveller, you're pushed away from things. That's why there's a high suicide among Travellers.

Once employers find out you're a Traveller, you won't get a job. You're waiting on the dole. You're depressed every day. You feel like shit because you can't provide for your family. Many of us turn to drink and drugs.

Many of us turned to drink and drugs after losing family members.

There was a piece of my heart gone when my father died. I got very depressed. When my grandfather died, I had no one to talk to. I thought, 'How can I push it behind me? How will I deal with this? Will I hang from a tree?' That's why I turned to drink and drugs.

I used drugs to numb the feelings. But they don't go away. Drugs bring you into the company of people that drag you into more trouble. I ended up in jail.

GETTING TATTOOS TO REMEMBER

When my grandfather died, I thought everybody forgot about him. I learnt from him to assess a situation and walk away from trouble. He told me to never drink or rob cars. I chose not to hang around with friends at school because of what they were into. I preferred to be with my grandfather. When he was alive, I never had a problem. So I got a tattoo for my grandfather and I put him on top of my heart. The tattoo meant more to me than anything in the world.



THE KING HAS FALLEN

The day you died I felt ill
My whole world stood still
When the sister came in my cell
And told me the news
A fuse in My head just went boom

My walls were closin'
Felt like I was in a tomb
So I jumped on the phone to ring home
To hear will I got some bad news
Mom I know, how did he leave Mom?
How did he go?

He went peaceful son and he wanted you to know
He waited for ya but he couldn't wait no more
When the angels came it was his time to go
When she said that, time up on the phone
Then I dropped to my knees and I screamed
please let it all be a dream

And unbeknownst to me my Mom was trying to get me free
So I went to my cell with my head in the sky
That moment there and then I just wanted to fuckin' die
Chill in clouds with my grandad in the sky
The next two days were the longest in my life
Sittin' in a cell wondering will I get to say bye

And to my surprise I was granted compassionate leave just for one night
So I jumped on the train to the grave to return to the jail next day
When I seen the coffin it was like a needle in the eye
Thought you were gonna sit up and say 'fooled ya boy'
I'm a man with pride but I cried and I cried
There was my mommy, my daddy, my uncles and my aunts
Most important my precious nana....but she was in a trance

A GRANDMOTHER'S STORY

Do Travellers go back to the famine? Our history goes back further again. It's not recorded but we know where we came from through the stories of our grandparents. And we're proud of it.

I asked my grandmother did she remember any talk of the famine from her parents and grandparents. And she said, we were always in the famine. She said, it's just that we knew how to live.

The country people were farmers, she said. They were that long settled in their ways that when the crops didn't grow, they didn't know how to keep living. Farmers were starved of the hunger. They couldn't get a crop of spuds.

But the Travellers survived because they were always in famine. I remember the old woman saying to me, when no work came and we were starving of the hunger, we'd move on. The Travellers always knew how to fix buckets. We knew where there was a waterhole. We knew how to find food. We knew where to go. We were nomads.

We were always in the famine, she said. We had to survive.

GET IN TOUCH

If you would like to write an article for the next edition of the newsletter please contact Anne Costello, Co-ordinator of the Travellers in Prison Initiative.

Anne can be contacted at anne@ssgt.ie or 0876577666.

These stories are contributions to the Empowerment Programme for Families of Travellers in Prison, a joint initiative by Galway Traveller Movement and the Travellers in Prison Initiative. With the exception of the poem, "The King has Fallen", the stories were facilitated and documented by Dr. Siobhán Madden.

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