

## Inmates Celebrate Diplomas with Rare Family Company

By Sean Dobbin

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ALBION — To New York state, she's an arsonist. But to 2-year-old Jaden, Shavon Hill is just "mom."

So as he sat on her lap in the visitor's room of the Albion Correctional Facility on Friday — the first time he'd seen her in months — Jaden pulled the miniature eyeglasses off a Mr. Potato Head doll and tried to mash them onto his mother's face.

It's unclear how aware Jaden is of his mother's past. When Hill set fire to a Suffolk County residence in 2009, he hadn't even celebrated his first birthday. But since she was imprisoned in Albion, Hill's life has been about getting back to her son.

Hill, 20, is on the verge of graduating from Family Ties, a program facilitated by the Osborne Association that teaches basic parenting skills to incarcerated mothers in the Albion Correctional Facility, the state's largest all-women prison.

Like many inmates in Albion, Hill is from the New York City area, and her family can rarely afford to bring Jaden up for a visit.

But as part of their graduation from the Family Ties program, the Osborne Association brings the graduates' children to Albion for a visit.

The visits take place twice a year, and on Friday, Jaden was one of 24 youths between the ages of 2 and 19 who visited the prison.

While the visit is always the most joyous part of the Family Ties program, it is also a time when the mothers can practice the skills they've learned during their classroom sessions.

The 12-week class, which covers everything from communication skills to forms of discipline, provides a specialized education that most of the women haven't been exposed to yet.

"I'm a young mother. I never really took a parenting program until I came here," said Hill, 20, who has 19 months remaining on her sentence.

So on the same day that police began their second day of searching for two escaped inmates from Monroe County Jail, 35 miles east, Hill acknowledged that she'd made a mistake, and said she was grateful for the parenting tips she's acquiring while she serves her time.

"The way I was raised was totally different," she said. "The things that I saw, that's not the way I want to raise my child."

Based in New York City, the Osborne Association has provided a broad range of vocational services to current and former inmates, and their families, since 1931. While the program is supported by a number of private donors, it also has historically received state funding, though it is one of the many programs that has yet to hear whether that funding will continue through the next year.

Women who go through the Family Ties program have far lower rates of recidivism than other female inmates, and fewer prison cells are being used as a result, said David Condliffe, the Osborne Association's director of development.

"This is a program that saves all taxpayers money," he said.

The time immediately following an inmate's release is when they're most likely to be caught doing something else illegal, said William Powers, superintendent of Albion Correctional Facility. Positive connections with the outside world are vital, so the inmate can fall into a law-abiding lifestyle upon release.

So after the Osborne Association's visits are over, the group makes online video-chatting available so the inmates can continue corresponding with their children.

It's how Lyndell McDuffie, imprisoned since 1999 on a felony assault charge, has stayed in touch with her 17-year-old daughter, Tayshona.

"We could write each other, but when you write, once you put the letter down, you just forget about it," said McDuffie, 41, originally from Brooklyn. "With the television, we're there face-to-face, we can communicate, we can see each other's emotions."

The open lines of communication have been good for both mother and daughter. Tayshona is on pace to graduate high school at the end of this year, and McDuffie is hoping to take advantage of the Osborne Association's transitional programs when she is released; she is eligible for parole in May.

"My son just died in September, my grandmother's in the hospital, so we don't really have anybody. It's just us," said McDuffie. "So we talk about everything. We cry together, we laugh, we joke. We're like sisters, and mother and daughter, and friends, all wrapped up into one."

At the end of the visit on Friday, the youths, their escorts and a group of prison officials gathered in Albion's main visitor hall to celebrate the inmates' graduation from the Family Ties program.

The 14 mothers walked down the aisle in purple caps and gowns — a welcome change from their usual prison greens — and sat down opposite their visitors.

Graduates, prison officials and Osborne Association representatives all shared some prepared remarks. Moments before the ceremony, Malyk Leonard — strong and tall and seemingly older than his 17 years — asked permission to address the crowd.

"The last time I saw my mom was about five years ago. I have two little brothers, and I've had to take the dad role," said Malyk. "But after reading her letters and coming up here, I saw that my mom seems to have changed for the better."

"Please, stay on the right track," he continued. "I need my mom. My brothers need my mom. My grandmother needs my mom. My whole family needs my mom."

"And your kids," he said, facing the rest of the women, "your family, they need you too. So please, stay on the right track."

By the time he finished, the women in purple were all crying. A few of them reached over to Yvette Leonard to comfort her — she'd later present Malyk with a certificate thanking him for being such a great big brother to her two other children, and mother and son would embrace.

Hill addressed the group soon after, tears still in her eyes.

When she finished, 2-year-old Jaden scurried to the front of the room, where his mother picked him up and held him tight.

Nineteen more months.