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COMMENTARY

Group offers children of inmates a chance to go to college

By MARY SANCHEZ
The Kansas City Star

"Daughter of a federal inmate" wasn't a label Stephanie Tinsley Regagnon fathomed for herself.

She has a master's degree, a happy marriage, a beautiful toddler and work as a government affairs specialist in St. Louis.

Her mother, Deborah Masten, was once mayor of Kirksville. She'd also been a volleyball coach at Truman State University, lauded for her work to force compliance with Title IX, gender equity for women's athletics.

That life crumbled in 2007 when Regagnon's mother was convicted of setting fire to their family-owned bar in Kirksville.

No one was injured, but Masten was sentenced to just over five years in the \$60,000 arson, which the family still contends was sparked by an electrical outlet.

Masten's sentence is nearing completion. And her daughter is laudably focused less on her experiences and more on the children of other inmates.

On her first visit with her mother, then in a Texas women's camp, Regagnon immediately recognized how privileged she was relative to other prisoners' families.

"It was always the same story," she said. "They'd live an hour and a half away and often didn't have the gas money to visit."

She watched young children carefully buy snacks in the prison vending machines for their mothers and then patiently wait for guards to start the visits.

Husbands and boyfriends often abandoned the children when the mothers entered prison, so the kids would land in foster care or be bounced among relatives or friends.

"These kids deserve a shot at life," Regagnon said. "If their families had any money before there was a prison sentence, they often don't afterward."

She discovered programs to help the children of the incarcerated while they are young. But an unmet need is help getting them into and through college, despite the fact that an education could provide the stability to stop generational prison records within families.

Regagnon has formed a foundation toward that goal. Ava's Grace Scholarship Foundation is named for her 18-month-old daughter. The foundation won tax-exempt status in February. It has raised more than \$16,000 toward the first scholarships, to be awarded next year.

On Friday, Ava's Grace will hold an informational gathering in Kansas City, an attempt to grow the organization on this side of the state from 5:30 to 8 p.m. at the Leopold Gallery, 324 W. 63rd St.

Ultimately, this is a storyline about choices.

Adult children can ingrain bitterness about their parents' problems. Or they can set about finding someone in a less favorable place in life and help.

Ava's Grace is the productive outcome of Regagnon's choice.

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