

Church group reaches out to inmates' children

For Christmas, Angel Tree gives kids presents on behalf of incarcerated parents



Riccayla Polk, 14, left, and her sister, McKenzie Spears, 10, right, receive Christmas gifts at St. John Church-Baptist. (Jose M. Osorio, Chicago Tribune / December 14, 2013)

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By Manya Brachear Pashman, Chicago Tribune reporter
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Derek Crosby's four children ranged in age from 2 months to 4 years when he was sent to prison for murder. While they often talk on the phone, he doesn't like for them to visit.

"I really don't like them seeing me in the position that I'm in," said Crosby, 34. "They have a bunch of questions; I missed out on all their lives. Maybe this saved my life, but we can't too much focus on the past. We have to get ourselves a good future going."

He also wants to give his family a good Christmas. Ever since Crosby transferred to Dixon Correctional Center, 120 miles west of Chicago, he has made sure his children receive gifts under the tree from their dad.

Crosby's kids are four of 12,374 boys and girls in the Chicago area whose incarcerated parents participate in Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree program. The ministry works with churches across the country, including more than 140 in the Chicago area, to help the families of inmates at Christmas.

But the rising number of prisoners and declining interest from churches have put Angel Tree in peril. In the Chicago area, 100 fewer churches are participating than last year — leaving 849 children without local church sponsors. Prison Fellowship has had to call on area corporations, schools and donors to fill the void.

"Chicago has been annually one of the toughest areas in the country we serve," said Jim Liske, president and CEO of Washington D.C.-based Prison Fellowship Ministries. He said when it comes to the number of children with incarcerated parents seeking help, Chicago lands in the top 5 every year.

But the program encompasses more than giving a gift on behalf of an incarcerated parent, Liske said. It also aims to connect families with local congregations that can provide services throughout the year.

Starting in the summer, inmates sign up their children to receive gifts given on their behalf. Inmates either express preferences or agree to allow program volunteers to contact the children's caregivers to compile wish lists. Volunteers either purchase the gifts and deliver them wrapped or invite the child and caregiver to a church-hosted party where gifts are distributed to the children.

Once a local church and an inmate's family make a connection, Angel Tree can open the door for children to take part in other initiatives such as mentoring, summer camps and other youth ministries.

"Once a person is incarcerated — and that starts at arrest — the state should be asking how do we bring good people home and help true reform take place from the inside out," Liske said. "Angel Tree is very much a part of that. We want a mom and dad to enter a home having a head start reconciling with their children and their spouse. Particularly

with dads who haven't taken a responsibility for their children. ... They have a couple months to think like parents."

Angel Tree also tries to boost a child's self-esteem and respect for their parents.

"This child gets to wake up on Christmas morning with a gift under the tree from mom," Liske said. "The children understand they're not orphaned. These kids want to be invisible because of the shame that's involved. You're not invisible and you don't have to be."

And it helps caregivers who often become parents unexpectedly when family members are taken into custody.

"It actually takes a load off my heart and makes the kids feel really good that their dad is contributing something," said Crosby's mother, Bridgette Maury of Lombard. "That's something from him that he's making happen for them. He really thinks about his kids."

Bonnie Curry, 59, the coordinator of the Angel Tree program at St. John Church-Baptist in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood, said the church has participated in Angel Tree for 25 years. The congregation invites inmates' families to a worship service in their honor and a party afterward. About half of the families every year are new and about 80 percent of the families invited attend.

"Sometimes the youth are a forgotten group," she said. "We want to reach out to them. We want them to come in and be a viable citizen of the city and the church too. We also realize a lot of times the parents will come in because of the child. ... That phrase in the Bible — 'A little child shall lead them' — we actually believe that to be true."

Two of Carome Carroll's five children receive presents from him through members of St. John. His girlfriend was five months pregnant with Carome Jr. when he went to prison for armed robbery.

"It gives you a sigh of joy and relief that there are some people out there who haven't abandoned us as parents just because we're incarcerated," said Carroll, 27. "The place where I come from, it takes a lot of parents to hold a house together. My mother was a single parent. ... That I get a chance to send gifts, it takes a load off of her. It gives me joy at the end of the day." *mbrachear@tribune.com*