



# Moms Interrupted

**S**ix women gather in an unnaturally bright room. Their voices rise to contend with the buzz of fluorescent lights, and with each other. Some color in books, some flip through magazines — all wear blue jumpsuits.

A seventh woman enters the room and instructs the others to quiet down. Magazines and coloring books are closed and pushed aside, conversations come to an end. The session begins.

Danyell Williams is the program coordinator of MOMobile, an outreach service operated by the Maternity Care Coalition, an independent social-services group. For three decades, MCC programs throughout southeastern Pennsylvania have promoted maternal and child health and well-being, with MOMobile — a key component since 1989 —

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► **The rise of women in prison has been accompanied by special challenges . . . childbirth, separation from youngsters at home, the need for programs that will mold them into productive role models and law-abiding citizens. But the choice is theirs.**



**Christine Weary appreciates the joy of freedom** while holding Destiny. Earlier, an incarcerated Weary tearfully discusses her separation from her daughter.

**Times story and photos by Jenny Swigoda**

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going on the road to particularly help low-income families.

Or even moms in prison.

And so it is on this January day that Williams is conducting a session at the Riverside Correctional Facility in Holmesburg, a complex for women incarcerated within the Philadelphia Prison System. MOMobile has been operating a specific program at Riverside since November 2006, a broad spectrum of support that includes workshops on prenatal and postpartum care for the young and soon-to-be mothers incarcerated there, providing a doula for support during labor, and delivering social services to inmates who request them for up to 12 months after their release from prison.

As she moves among the six female inmates in the room, Williams hands out two-page questionnaires about child care. The women are dressed in the standard-issue prison jumpsuits. Some are young mothers, some are currently pregnant, but all are trying to make the best of their situations while incarcerated at Riverside.

Williams is a strong believer in this outreach, and that comes through clearly during a later interview at the MOMobile office in Center City.

“Every woman needs some type of support,” she says, “particularly for our clients because they’re incarcerated, which means they’re not allowed to have any contact with their family through this process.”

Paramount among these services for the expectant mothers is the support of a doula during the birthing process. This sort of maternal coach gives non-medical physical and emotional support to women during pregnancy and childbirth. Williams and three other MOMobile staff members are certified doulas who rotate during a monthly on-call cycle in the event an inmate goes into labor.

Williams is passionate about this issue. She sees it as a basic human right.

“This is a complex issue,” she says of motherhood and imprisonment, “and you have bad apples in every bunch, but overall these are good women and they just want to take care of their children.”

And Danyell Williams, in turn, wants to take care of these young and emerging mothers.

For example, she cheers recently enacted legislation



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**Antoinette Leak's arm is tattooed** with the name of her young son, Darryl.

that made Pennsylvania the 10th state to ban putting inmate mothers in shackles during childbirth — a practice that had been perplexingly commonplace. The measure, introduced by state Sen. Daylin Leach (D-17th dist.), who represents parts of Montgomery and Delaware counties, was highlighted during an Aug. 30 news conference at the Pennsylvania Prison Society, and Williams says the anti-shackling law has been a long time

coming.

“Regardless of what that person did, to have someone shackled, restrained, handcuffed to a bed while she gives birth is barbaric,” Williams said. “It would be truly insane to try to escape while giving birth.”

Incarcerated women giving birth in local hospitals are not permitted to have visits from family members.

An inmate mother gives birth with four people present in the room — the doctor, a nurse, and two correctional officers. Typically, the new mom stays in the hospital for 48 hours after a natural delivery, and six days if the baby is delivered via Cesarean section.

According to MOMobile, about 10 to 20 women imprisoned at the Riverside Correctional Facility give birth in any given year.

At present, the prison is holding about 770 female inmates in its 143,000-square-foot housing building. The operational budget for the city prison system, which encompasses six correctional facilities and accommodates about 8,500 inmates, is \$240 million this year.

It costs the system about \$95 every day for each inmate in custody.

Antoinette Leak sits in the visiting room of  
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“  
**This is a complex issue, and you have bad apples in every bunch, but overall these are good women and they just want to take care of their children.**  
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**Danyell Williams**  
*MOMobile program coordinator*

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the Riverside Correctional Facility with her 5-year-old son Darryl and family friend Bob Burns. The hard plastic chairs, bolted to the floor, will have to do for this family visit. The youngster doesn't seem to mind as he bounces around the room and hugs his mother. Leak smiles as she watches him. During their hour together, mother and son talk about life at home until, toward the end of the visit, Darryl starts to get antsy.

"Give me a hug and you can leave," Leak says softly to her child.

Darryl gives his mom a good one. She watches as Burns leads the boy out of the room.

Antoinette Leak is not pregnant, but she does have Darryl and 2-year-old daughter Destiny waiting for her at home. For now, they are in the care of Leak's mother, Denise Campbell, who lives in the Northeast's Lawncrest section. Campbell works at a local pizza shop, bringing in money to care for her two grandchildren and her son Edgar, 19, who was under house arrest for a drug-possession charge.

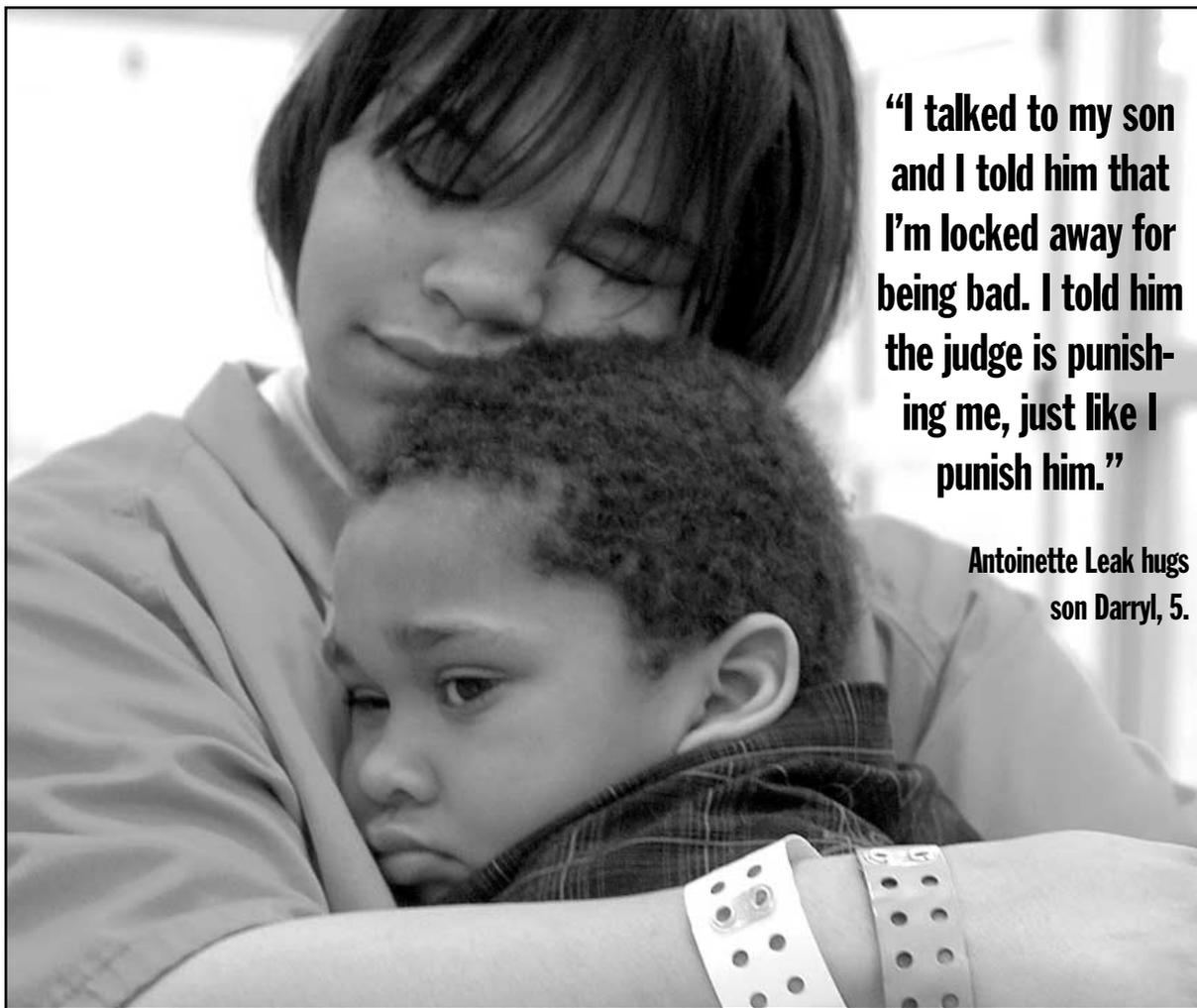
"It's very stressful," Campbell says, reflecting on her daughter's situation. "My first concern is with the babies."

Toys are scattered throughout the house as Darryl rides up on a skateboard, his face concealed by an ape mask. Campbell looks over at Destiny, asleep in her crib.

"She's calling me 'mom,'" Campbell laments. "She doesn't know Antoinette."

The inmates have different ways of explaining the situation to their children. Leak decided to skip any sugarcoating and give it to Darryl straight, in a way a 5-year-old could understand.

"I talked to my son and I told him that I'm locked away for being bad. I told him the judge is punishing me, just like I punish him," Leak says, seated in the common area of Unit A at Riverside, a cell-block she has called



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**Antoinette Leak hugs son Darryl, 5.**

home for the last 16 months.

This is not Antoinette Leak's first brush with the law. It's her second stint in prison, but this is the longest she has been locked up. Leak has a history of fighting and violence dating to 2002, according to court dockets.

"My son is growing up quick . . . and my daughter don't even know me."

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Malika Saada Saar is the founder and executive director of the Rebecca Project for Human Rights, a Washington, D.C., organization often honored for its nationwide work to help women mired in poverty and substance abuse and lost in the criminal-justice system. Most of them are single mothers in recovery, often doing time in prison.

Saada Saar's group has worked with the MOMobile program and other advocacy groups attuned to the issue of pregnant women serving jail terms. She attributes the rising rate of women in prison — the national female population has increased by about 757 percent over the past three decades, she says — to changes in sentencing guidelines and the judicial system and the supposed "war on drugs."

"Women, especially mothers, are victims of mandatory-minimum sentencing," Saada Saar said during a recent telephone interview, referring to penal-code guidelines that specify automatic jail time.

These women typically are first-time, non-violent offenders whose crimes and rates of recidivism hardly parallel those of male offenders in the nation's prisons, she explained.

"In general, we struggle to meet the needs of mothers regardless of economic background," Saada Saar added, noting that many women are "entrenched in poverty because of incarceration."

Over the years, studies have concluded that many of



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**Antoinette Leak's mother, Denise Campbell, holds Destiny, 2, in her Lawncrest home. They are joined by Leak's son, Darryl, 5, and her brother Edgar, 19.**

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their crimes — such as thefts, drug offenses or cases of fraud — are rooted in that poverty. Saada Saar thinks there's room for the justice system to extend more outreach and second chances.

"Most situations, it is a one-strike rule," she said of rigid sentencing guidelines.

In her work with the Rebecca Project, she has found that incarcerated women usually are the primary caregiver in the family, and that time away from their children can be devastating for everyone. In most states, she added, individuals cannot get immediate access — or, in some cases, access at all — to food stamps and other government-subsidized programs if they have prior drug convictions, which often is the case of women coming out of prison.

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Antoinette Leak has turned 22 behind bars. She potentially could spend up to four years in prison.

Because of Leak's history of violence, the judge ordered her to take part in anger-management groups while at Riverside. The therapy session is led by Dr. Lynn Rosenthal, a psychologist who advocates for the inmates' mental health and well-being. Week by week, Rosenthal works with inmates to help them learn coping skills and recognize issues that may challenge them during day-to-day life in prison.

There are many reasons, of course, why people end up behind bars. In the case of women, Rosenthal said, the cellblocks aren't filled with your standard assortment of thieves, armed robbers or shooters. Their predicaments often have a more emotional connection.

"There is an increased violence toward women. Because of this, they recapitulate the violence, they

**"I knew that I was guilty," Weary admits now. "I knew that I was going to have to suffer for it."**

internalize their feelings, they get into drugs and alcohol and they have fury," Rosenthal said during an interview at Riverside.

According to the Women's Prison Association, a national advocacy organization, a study undertaken last



JENNY SWIGODA / TIMES PHOTOS

**Christine Weary mops the floor** of the laundry room at the Riverside Correctional Facility.

year by the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice found that two-thirds of female inmates in the nation's prisons had been incarcerated for non-violent crimes, primarily drug or property offenses.

Overall, 115,779 women were incarcerated in the nation's state and federal prisons at midyear 2008, and nearly two-thirds were mothers. White women repre-

lives or the situations that may have pushed them down a negative path. She tries to reach them in one-on-one sessions.

The main objective is to decrease outbursts, decrease depression, and plant the seeds of change and growth. Not an easy task.

"The last graduation," Rosenthal said, referring to female inmates who'd completed her therapy program, "a few of them were really, really still angry, so I started seeing them (individually) because they might have learned the skill but maybe they don't know how to apply it."

Dr. Daniel Pirtle, a Holy Family University professor who teaches juvenile-justice courses, concurs with Rosenthal's assessment that emotional scars can ignite explosive moments that land women in the courtroom.

"(My research) says there are several paths that lead young girls into the system. And one of those is some type of abuse . . . be it sexual abuse, emotional abuse, you



**Female inmates** at Riverside pass the time with coloring books and magazines before the start of a post-partum class.

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name it. And so they start acting out as a result of that abuse," Pirtle explained during an interview in his Holy Family office.

He had worked as a probation officer in Tennessee and Texas while studying for his master's degree and then his doctorate. His interest in juvenile justice stemmed from his younger sister's many brushes with the law. He often reflected on why he'd headed down one path and his sister headed down another, one that tended to bring her heartbreak. In retrospect, he thinks one sign was his sister's involvement with older men.

"When young girls get actively involved with older guys, especially older delinquent guys, they're much more likely to head down that path," Pirtle said, explaining that his sister was 12 when she began dating older guys.

How do women move forward and break away from the constraints of an incarcerated life? Pirtle says it is important for them to start a career. Having a family, something to live for, is another uplifting factor that'll help them redefine their lives and focus.

"A healthy relationship, a job, a promising future. Those three things have been shown to pull a woman from that lifestyle," the professor said.

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Christine Wearry gave birth in prison. Her younger of two daughters will always be a reminder of that. The name Wearry chose for the infant could not have been more appropriate.

Destiny.

After an hour and a half in labor, Wearry gave birth at the Albert Einstein Medical Center on March 19. The correctional officers in the room would not remove the chains around her ankles and body, but the nurse insisted that they be taken off to give Wearry free movement during the delivery.

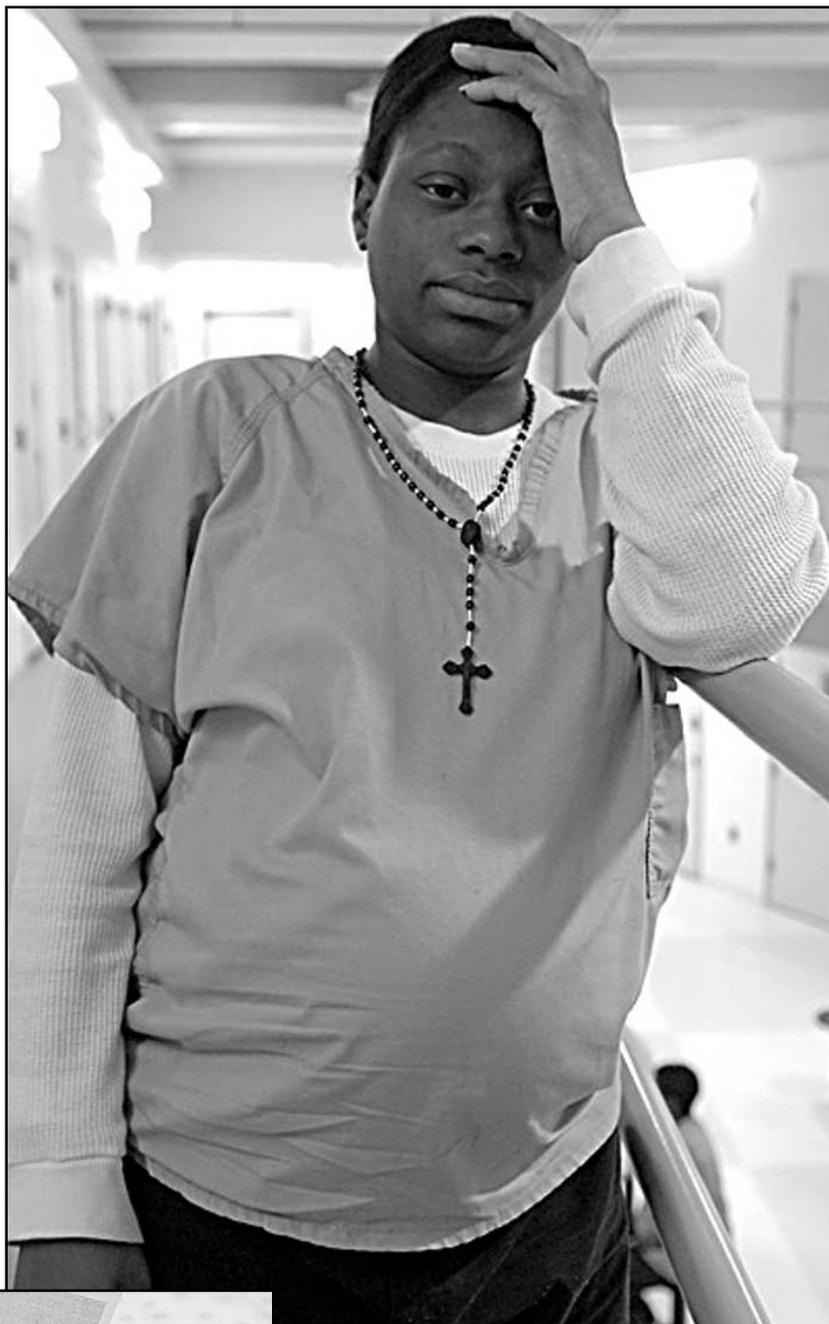
She was allowed some time with the baby. Then Destiny was whisked away, to be picked up by Wearry's mother and cared for until her daughter's release from prison.

That time away from her child hurt the most.

Her predicament can be traced to April 2008, when Wearry and a group of friends were at The Gallery shopping mall in Center City, making T-shirts in memory of a friend who had committed suicide.

With emotions already strained, Wearry recalled, a girl not known to the group made some kind of flippant comment as they waited for a train in the SEPTA subway station at Eighth and Market streets. Then all hell broke loose.

According to a police report of the incident, Wearry's group attacked the 16-year-old girl, who was kicked in



JENNY SWIGODA / TIMES PHOTOS

**Christine Wearry, while incarcerated** last spring at Riverside. At left, an anger-management form probes the meaning of discipline.

the back and fell to the ground, the impact knocking out a tooth. When the girl got up, her assailants punched and kicked her, and someone grabbed her purse, the report said.

A SEPTA employee called police; the victim identified her attackers as they boarded a train. Wearry and six others were arrested and charged in the assault.

Her parents posted bail, enabling Wearry to go home while awaiting adjudication of the charges against her. During that time, she became pregnant; she already had a toddler at home.

Although she had no prior criminal record, Wearry accepted a plea bargain and was sentenced to a prison term of 11 to 23 months at Riverside. Looking back, she said during a late-spring prison interview, she suspected that her sentence was severe because of a highly publicized attack in the city just two weeks earlier — the subway death of a Starbucks manager who was jumped for kicks by four youths and suffered a fatal asthma attack.

At the time of Wearry's sentencing, one stipulation of the plea agreement was that she take part in the Options Program, a support group for addicts, and that she be incarcerated in Unit B, a Riverside cellblock designated for addicts. She would be separated from the other pregnant inmates held in Unit A. Wearry was about six months' pregnant when she started her sentence.

She couldn't understand this arrangement. After all, she wasn't a drug addict, and during the mandatory Options meetings she'd sit in silence as the other inmates related sorrowful stories of addiction and loss. With little to add to the meetings, other than a disinterested gaze, Wearry did share one thing in common with the addicts around her, a reality check that's an important first step of any rehabilitation program — the need to admit the problem.

"I knew that I was guilty," Wearry admits now. "I knew that I was going to have to suffer for it."

Christine Wearry walked out of the Riverside Correctional Facility on June 11, 2010, released for good behavior. On this particular summer day, she sits on the front steps of her mother's house, discussing the whole experience, sorting out everything she'd been through these last few months. She lovingly holds Destiny on her lap while keeping a motherly eye on Desirae, 3, who is chasing butterflies up and down the block.

Wearry seems calmer than the last time a *Times* reporter saw her, during a visit to Riverside. She smiles more. She excitedly lays out her plans to start over. She looked forward to enrolling in job-training courses offered by the Pennsylvania CareerLink program, a big part of her plan to build a brighter future for her family. And, of course, to build her own esteem.

"Now I have a better mind frame," Wearry says, Desirae squealing with delight in the background. "The things that happened, it made me who I am right now. I don't say that I regret it, because if I had regretted it, I don't know if things would be the way it is today . . . as far as me being who I am today." ••

