Jessica Katz

Jessica Katz is a social worker who has spent the last 15 years of her career working with incarcerated mothers and fighting for their rights as parents.

Twelve years ago, Jessica was hired to create the first family literacy program in the country at Oregon’s only women’s prison, Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. This program, known as the Even Start Program, eventually morphed into an intensive case management program called the Family Preservation Project.

The Family Preservation Project takes a holistic approach toward addressing intergenerational cycles of criminal justice involvement by addressing its root causes. The program provided therapeutic visitation in an effort to strengthen the relationship between an incarcerated mother and her children. In addition to the intensive support and case management offered to incarcerated mothers, the program also provided wrap-around services to children and support to Caregivers.

Through these programs, Jessica has given these women the tools they need to become better mothers and advocates for themselves. Moreover, Jessica’s work has given countless women hope that they can keep their families together through incarceration.

We had the pleasure of interviewing this inspiring individual.

By: Elizabeth Ottman, J.D. Candidate 2017

Tell me something interesting about yourself.

In addition to my work with the Family Preservation Project, I am also a yoga teacher. I've been practicing yoga for 20 years and completed an intensive teacher training 13 years ago.

How did you first get involved in child welfare and reunification issues?

I began my career in New York at Columbia University where I received my Master of Arts in Social Work. I was also selected as one of ten Social Work students to participate in a certificate program at the law school. Through the law school, I started working at Columbia's Family Law Clinic and began travelling to prisons throughout New York to help educate incarcerated parents about their rights.
My second year in the MSW program, I began working with the Children's Aid Society in New York, which is one of the first foster care agencies in the country - I think it's over 100 years old. I started working there as an intern in the intake unit. I was very shocked at the cases that came in. Most were neglect cases, but the neglect stemmed from the families being disenfranchised, having access to limited resources, living in poverty, and/or struggles with addiction.

At Children's Aid Society, I worked to put together a group to advocate for birth parents and help them navigate the system. I was able to offer a curriculum called "Families for Reunification," developed by my Supervisor, which helped families identify and build on their strengths, as well as support them in putting their families back together. That was really meaningful work for me.

**When did you begin working with Coffee Creek Correctional Facility?**

When I moved back to Oregon, someone alerted me to a job opening at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. The local college, in partnership with the Department of Corrections, was looking for someone to start a family literacy program. I was hired and developed and implemented the Even Start Program. I did that for about eight years. It was the only program of its kind in the country.

The program allowed incarcerated mothers, and kids to go to school together. The children were brought in twice a month for three-hours of early childhood education classes that focused on interactive literacy activities. The parents would work directly with the kids; however, the parents were also separately taking parenting and other adult education courses.

The program was doing really well and was very successful, but after 8 years the federal funding dried up. Once that happened, I took it as an opportunity to take the years of research and practice knowledge we had with Even Start and create a dream version of the program. We wanted to focus more on our specific population of incarcerated mothers and their needs. That culminated in the development of the Family Preservation Project in 2010.

**Tell us about the type of work that the Family Preservation Project performs.**

Our main goal with the program was to help the incarcerated mothers actively parent from prison and to try to intervene early in the children's lives so that we could try to move the dial with the intergenerational cycles of criminal justice involvement. The project also helped mothers participate in their child welfare proceedings. These mothers aren't just cut off from society through their incarceration, but also from the entire child welfare process.

One constant barrier for incarcerated mothers was the phone system in the prison. In order to make an outgoing call, you would have to have the recipient of that call be on your approved calling list. Registration required providing lots of personal information, so many people were not comfortable registering. Often, this meant that the incarcerated women had no means of getting in touch with their case workers. As a result, the child welfare cases just marched along without them.
To help with this, we developed the Family Resource Center. In this second-tier offering we trained senior members of FPP to act as mentors to women struggling to parent and support their children from the inside. Because a smaller group of women received very intensive services and support and training, we developed a mechanism for these women to pay that forward to their community. These women carried caseload of 15-20 women to help them with the reunification process.

An unexpected benefit of this project was witnessing how healing it was for our mothers to become engaged in helping other incarcerated mothers navigate systems and begin to rebuild important relationships. Once you land yourself in prison, there is so much guilt and shame around abandoning your child and being taken away from society. The opportunity for these mothers to give back became a very important aspect of the project. We did not anticipate how much it would help them heal and become whole again.

**How do you select the participants for the Family Preservation Project?**

The program is very sought after, so anytime we have an opening there is always a considerable response to get in. Since we cannot serve everyone, we do have some basic eligibility criteria. When we created the project, we wanted to focus on families with young children to ensure early intervention. As a result, we look for mothers with at least one child between the ages of birth and 7.

Also, logistically, we need the kids to be within a certain geographical area. It doesn’t make sense to have these young children traveling hours and hours a couple times a month for this program. We didn’t think that would be in the child’s best interest, so we have a geographical requirement.

It’s also important to remember that many of the incarcerated mothers do not have a great support system set up on the outside. As a result, we require the incarcerated mother to have someone on the outside willing to help her participate in the program. Helping them includes bringing the child to their bi-monthly visits, as well as helping the mother communicate with her child's teachers and mental health professionals. Oftentimes, the mothers do not have anyone willing to commit to them in that way.

Many family members and friends feel that the mother doesn’t deserve to have a relationship with the child after going to prison. Another common reason for not participating is the fear of bringing a child to the prison. They worry that the child will start to think of prison as a fun place to go to play with their mom. Another obstacle is money. A lot of families don't have the gas money to get to and from the prison. We have started providing gas cards, but the participants have to get to us before we can give them out. They might not have enough gas to physically get to the program. So, in a lot of ways, it becomes a self-selecting process.

Because of the small number of women that are able to actively participate in the Family Preservation Project, we knew we wanted to find ways to help the larger community. To do so, we began the Family Resource Center. We created a monthly speaker series where we brought in speakers from various fields who would provide education on issues the women might be facing. Some examples of speakers we’ve had are child welfare workers, family law attorneys, Judges, nutritionists, and mental health professionals.
What are some things you would like to implement or changes you would like to see made within the Family Preservation Project? Are there more things you hope the program can accomplish?

We are hoping to scale the work up. We want to be able to serve the entire community in some way. Currently, there are about 1300 women at Coffee Creek and 85% are mothers. Outside of regular visitation opportunities, collectively, the programs that create opportunities for therapeutic visitation, serve only 3% of that population. So, over 90% of the population either do not have the opportunity or cannot take advantage of opportunities to receive support around reunification. We specifically want to help the women who have open child welfare cases to help get them legal support and guidance. It would be great to have a formal liaison position to bridge the gap between the child welfare and the prison system; someone to walk these women through the child welfare process and explain what their rights and responsibilities are throughout the life of their case; someone to support them through the legal proceedings, etc...

This year, a wonderful filmmaker, Brian Lindstrom, made a documentary film called *Mothering Inside* about mothers in the Family Preservation Project at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. This film is the realization of a long-time goal. I felt like I encountered so much raw humanity over the years. I wanted people to meet the women and hear their stories and for them to be humanized in the process. I hoped that the film could inspire a broader conversation; not only about these particular women and their children, but the larger class of women who they in a sense represent. Right now, many of the women who were featured in the film, and have recently released from prison are on a speaking tour accompanying the film.

Ideally, we want to get the film in front of judges, district attorneys, mental health professionals, and child welfare workers, educators, health professionals, etc... as a module within child welfare training. Our main goal is to bring more awareness and attention to what happens to families, in a broader sense, when a mother goes to prison. We feel it’s very important for people to associate what’s going on in the film with real people, so having the talk-back following the film has been critical.

To watch the trailer for *Mothering Inside*, please visit: [https://vimeo.com/121860580](https://vimeo.com/121860580)

Was there one experience or case that had a big impact on your career or the way you see reunification?

Wow - there are so many! There is one woman who is still in prison and dealing with a child welfare case. Her case was moving towards terminating her parental rights. When she first got to prison, she wasn't allowed any contact with her daughter for about two years. She was a full-time mom before coming to prison, so zero contact was a very painful and abrupt transition. Due to the lack of communication, her child welfare case just kind of marched along without her being able to participate.

She was desperate to get into the program to change the trajectory of her case. We were eventually able to get her in and help to a certain degree. We helped her gain visitation with the daughter once a month.
The daughter, who I believe was 6 when her mom left and 8 before she was allowed the supervised visits, was very traumatized by her mom leaving. She was hiding in closets and acting out; however, once the visits started, there was a huge change in the daughter's demeanor and she really started to do well. We pushed harder and eventually succeeded in getting her daughter fully into the program. Despite the daughter's positive changes, the child welfare case kept marching along towards termination of the mother's rights.

Despite all the setbacks, the mother has continued to fight as hard as she can for her daughter. She has been arguing that the decision to terminate her parental rights is not being made in the best interests of the child. Moreover, the child is now at an age where she can articulate what she wants to happen. Her case is still on appeal, but she is continuing to fight.

It has been really amazing to watch this woman's transformation. When we first met her, she was so hopeless. She had been told by so many people that she wasn't any good and that she wasn't worthy of being somebody's mother. This type of mentality is prevalent among incarcerated mothers. By the time most of these women get to prison, their role as a mother has been very much used against them. A lot of these women begin to believe that they don't deserve to be mothers. Watching this mother work through her shame and guilt and build herself back up to fight for what she believes has been very inspirational. It has been a very powerful experience.

**Would you consider her case atypical?**

It's not atypical. Most cases have similar facts to hers.

As I mentioned, 85% of the population at Coffee Creek are mothers and the Family Preservation is only able to serve about 10-12 women and their children and families. Most of those women would love to fight, but just do not have the resources to be able to do so.

What made her case unusual is that she had a very dogged attorney, a lot of support from staff in the program, and a lot of support from the Caregiver. She was able to heal from the tremendous amount of guilt and shame over abandoning her daughter without being able to explain why. Despite all of these things, her parental rights would not survive her five year prison sentence.

**Are there any public misconceptions that you would love to see change?**

The big public misconception we would love to change is that there is no direct linkage between being in prison and being a bad mother. I hear over and over again that people believe these mothers don't love their kids *enough*. People think that if they did love their kids, they wouldn't have ended up in prison, but that is just not the case. There is no direct line.

A lot of these women have struggled and made poor choices, but in my 12 years of working with this population, I have yet to meet the mother who didn't have the best of intentions for her child. I have met a lot of women who did not receive a lot of parenting themselves, and who did not necessarily have the tools to be the best parents.
Changing this public misconception was also the main purpose of the film. In addition to all of the pain and suffering and sometimes ugliness within the prison walls, there is also so much humanity that no one gets to see. It’s not an easily accessible environment, but I really wanted the public to see this human element and meet some of the women and families that I had the privilege of getting to work with. Hopefully, seeing the film will change people’s perceptions.

Is there anything else you want to highlight about the program or you work?

The Oregon Department of Corrections discontinued funding for this program in early 2015. Believing very strongly in the merits of the work as well as the projects outcomes, advocates, including many graduates of the program, have been working to reinstate the program. The Oregon State Legislature has been in session from February to July, and we have engaged in work there to address not only this issue, but the larger public health epidemic facing the close to 3 million children in the US with a parent behind bars.

A primary goal has been to find a new home for the program. The stated reason our funding was cut was that the program was too expensive and served too few people. The program was previously housed in the local community college, which came at a high cost. Advocates have been working tirelessly for about 8 months to try to get the program back and expand it.

The YWCA of Greater Portland has come forward as very interested in continuing and growing the work. There is strong bi-partisan legislative and community support for addressing issues facing children of incarcerated parents within the State Department of Corrections. The 2015 will come to an end within the next week or so, and are hoping to see the program get a new life.

The unintended silver-lining of the program getting cut was getting to see the graduates become really civically engaged and empowered. Though they are now out of prison and reunited with their children, they have become fierce advocates for the needs facing families separated by incarceration. Through meeting with legislators and community supporters and telling their stories, they are effectively changing people’s perceptions and getting them sold on why this work is important. Watching the women heal through giving back has been transformative. It has been the most amazing and humbling part of this entire experience.

For more information on our efforts, and to hear from two of our program graduates who worked on the film, please visit: https://kboo.fm/parentingfromprison.