Long Day’s Journey

From Far Rockaway to Sing Sing, the children of an inmate with AIDS hold a family together.

November 1, 1998 By Angelo Ragaza

New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen has undergone dramatic changes since I moved in six years ago. Disney has colonized Times Square, and all the sex shops now hawk trinkets. But one neighborhood ritual has remained constant: the buses that leave from Ninth Avenue and 45th Street every Saturday night, bound for prisons upstate.

On those evenings, the line at Smiler’s Deli is dozens deep -- women, mostly, with children in tow, waiting to buy sustenance for the night’s long ride. From all points of the city, hundreds of wives and girlfriends, sons and daughters, head north each week. Some spend all night on buses bound for facilities near the Canadian border; others travel just an hour to prisons in neighboring counties.

Veniece Cid, 23, makes the trip with her brother, Joey, 19. Every three months, they board a train to visit their father, José Cid, an inmate at Sing Sing prison in Ossining, New York. Since José tested positive for HIV in 1994, Veniece has been his rock of support. With one year of college and experience as an administrative assistant, the sharp, articulate young woman is also coping with the family’s financial struggles. These days, Veniece is not only looking for work but looking after her mother, who is laid up at home with a broken ankle.

Veniece’s parents separated when their daughter was 8. At the time, José was leading a fast life -- using and selling drugs, gambling and sleeping around, and facing regular run-ins with the law. At one point Joey shut José out of his life, but Veniece has remained devoted -- despite the drastic limits that her father’s four-year incarceration has placed on her ability to care for him.

The last time she and Joey saw their father, he was in the hospital with a 107-degree fever, so delirious he could barely recognize his own children. “The doctors will not disclose information to me, even though I’m his daughter,” she says. “I have to be persistent and many times, rude, because no one wants to let me know anything, not even his medications.”

She has responded by bombarding José with articles about new HIV findings and treatments. Through letters, Veniece, Joey and their father have become closer than many families who live together. “It’s hard to get money in jail,” she says, “and still, he sends us stamps.”

Saturday, August 1, 6:20 a.m.

For Veniece and Joey, getting to Sing Sing in time for visiting hours means getting up at 3:30 in the morning. From their home in Far Rockaway, Queens, they hop the A Train at around 5 a.m., which makes endless local stops before it reaches Manhattan. Once they get to Grand Central, they eat breakfast at the only restaurant open at that hour, McDonald's. Then they catch the 7:20 train to Ossining.

We have arranged to meet outside the information booth in Grand Central at 6:30. I get there 10 minutes early, but Veniece and Joey, as well as André, our photographer, are already there. Soon, over breakfast and coffee, we are trading personal histories and Asian astrological signs. "My father and I are both Tigers," Veniece says. Warriors, I think. Bruce Lee's sign. "This is supposed to be our year," she adds hopefully.

7:30 a.m.

On the train ride up to Ossining, the asphalt of the Bronx gives way to the green hills of the Hudson River valley. Joey, in his third year of a sports-medicine program, says his friends are all aware of what he's going through. "If I lost any friends because of my father," he says resolutely, "I didn't have their friendship in the first place." Joey says he gets his openness from his father. Since his diagnosis, José has been unusually frank about his HIV status with fellow inmates and officers. And Veniece recalls him sitting down with family members, some of whom he hadn't seen in years, and telling them he had tested positive. "I really look up to him for that," she says. "I'm always going to remember that strength."

9:30 a.m.

Once we get to Sing Sing, Veniece, Joey and I are told by a guard to wait at a picnic table outside, beneath an enormous wooden shed. There's a playground with swings and a slide, children running amok, couples touching and kissing with a startling lack of self-consciousness. Through the barbed wire that surrounds us, there's a sun-dappled view of the river. But Veniece, who brings me coffee, reminds me of where we are. "If I offer you a cup of coffee, it's not a big deal," she says. "But for an inmate in here, it's 'Here's a cup of coffee. Now you owe me.'"

When José finally emerges from the dark, fortresslike prison, he's beaming, as tall, handsome and charming as Veniece had led me to believe. He envelopes his children in his arms.

As he tells his story, I see a glimmer of the fun-loving father Veniece recalls from early childhood -- the man who always had a new joke to crack, who let the kids out of bed to watch the tube until all hours, who could rustle up a mean scrambled eggs and beat anyone at paddleball. Now he exudes the kind of grace one only earns from hitting bottom and rediscovering the meaning of faith. When he found out he was HIV positive, José was serving his second sentence for selling drugs. The news brought him to the lowest point in his life. "I was knocking myself in the head," he says, "feeling guilty about losing my son, losing my daughter, losing my life. I destroyed my marriage and my relationship with my children." Two years later, a dangerous bout of PCP landed José in the hospital. "I wasn't on medication," he says. "I wanted to die." But Veniece told him to hold on and to expect a call from Joey, who had kept a painful distance for more than a decade.

“’I don’t care what happened between you and Mom,’” José recalls Joey saying when he got on the phone. “’What’s in the past is gone. Don’t die on me.’” It was the deliverance José had been waiting for.

José stops abruptly and takes Joey in his arms. We’re all at the brink of tears, and suddenly I feel like an intruder. What’s more, witnessing their love for each other, I experience the last emotion that I ever expected while visiting a man living with HIV behind bars -- envy.

Sunday, August 2, 10:30 p.m.

The next day, I call Joey and Veniece to ask them what they thought about the visit. Joey sounds almost peaceful; telling their story, he says, “felt like a load off.”

But Veniece is at a loss. Because José isn’t a citizen, when he completes his sentence in a couple of months, he will be deported to the Dominican Republic. “They don’t even have AZT there, much less protease inhibitors that have kept him going,” Veniece whispers. People with AIDS, she says, are still treated as pariahs there. “I’m praying for a miracle.”

On the platform at Ossining the day before, waiting for the train home, I felt as if a miracle had already happened. Looking out at the constellation of white sails dotting the Hudson, I remembered José saying that he planned to use his deportation as an opportunity to collaborate with government and relief agencies in the Dominican Republic, to shatter the silence shrouding AIDS and to improve the country’s prospects for treatment. Where others might see a death sentence, he sees possibilities.

“I don’t consider myself to be in jail,” he said, back at Sing Sing. “That fence doesn’t exist, because my mind is free.”

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