

FAMILY FOR A DAY

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The last time I attended family day in prison was in 2004. I was at a different stage of my incarceration back then; I was at a different stage in my life. I was housed inside of the annex in Jessup, Maryland. Family day was offered as an incentive to help curb the routine violence of prison life. Besides the threat of losing what little restricted liberties we held, there really was no other deterrents to keep the peace. Confined people behaved for the opportunity to spend extended time with their loved ones. Prisoners took a lot on the chin to once again be in the presence of people who still counted them as human. I was so hopeless back then. I moved under the conditioning of my environment. I carried with me the customary chip Baltimore boys like me pick up on our journey. I was just an inmate serving a life sentence looking for any reason to not give up, and for me, family day was that reason.

It feels like a lifetime ago since I was housed inside of the annex. Although I am still incarcerated, serving time for me has a new meaning—a deeper purpose is not attached to my prison sentence. My want to live in pursuit of knowledge is stronger than my will to survive in functioning ignorance.

In January of 2022, I was accepted as one of the first 25 students into Georgetown University's Bachelor of Liberal Arts program at the Patuxent Institution. Ideally, the opportunity presented me with a chance to rewrite my story or at the very least take control of my own narrative. Being convicted can feel as if your crime has become a foul added layer of skin, an unconcealable smudge on the face of your humanity that dictates the terms of your every interaction until the stilling of your heart. Being accepted into Georgetown and making it infraction free to attend a family day both represented a reprieve from the hopelessness of prison. One by way of the subtle nature of love, the other, by way of intrusive force of education.

Picture the scene: a large grass covered field, that on any given day can and often is converted into a battlefield. A track, basketball courts, bleachers, all enclosed by fences and barbed wire. Prisoners watched continuously by the guards in their strategically positioned towers. The entire area patrolled by searching for the spontaneous violence that defines prison. This is the setting of a prison yard on a normal day. Family days are different. The battlefields are turned in spaces for reunions. Apprehensive stares are replaced by caring glances. Perilous engagement give way to loving embraces. The customary tension is not welcomed on family days. Absent is the normal energy present in the house of

condemnation, replaced by the familiarity of blood ties and intimate relationships.

Over the past two years I've grown accustomed to watching the energy of prison transform. It's transformation I witness daily, as myself and my fellow Georgetown students march through the halls of Patuxent on our way to class. Driven by a call foreign within correctional institutions, motivated towards a goal in the first of its kind; freedom through education, prisoners reconstructed into students, teach those branded broken and irredeemable to care for the whole of another person, not far removed from danger and anxiety filled hours of incarceration. In the beginning, we had to work out a lot of the chinks. Under normal circumstances, in any other prison setting, the majority of us would be enemies. We are a diverse group of individuals representing almost every facet of life. Our first lesson was the unlearning of our biases against different races, creeds, and sexual orientations. Most of us had been surviving in prison for, at minimum, one or two decades. All of us had picked up the mentality and mannerisms of seasoned convicts—distrusting, cold, and guarded. We moved and thought in modes that kept us alive until our admittance to Georgetown. It would take more than an acceptance letter from a prestigious university to crumble the walls we had built around ourselves. It would take a complete submission to change.

As a collective of individuals, each man began his journey hidden tightly behind a mask. We concealed the things that prison would not grant safety—joy, hope, vulnerability, trust, and fear—all things mourned at our private shrines. Our housing still represented a potential war zone daily. Reading and digesting the information we were learning, slowly the classrooms became our sanctuary. We could breathe easy as we listened to lectures. Nobody was trying to harm us while we studied—for many of us, our days spent inside the classrooms offered our first opportunity to relax in years. As we took part in philosophical discussions examining Plato and Descartes, knowledge consumed a space that we reserved for the politics of prison. As we exercised our ability to argue our points and express our thoughts on issues ranging from global warming to world religions, it was clear that a shift was happening on various levels throughout our group. Our formal education was changing us; however, we were still physically imprisoned.

I could imagine other students getting ready for classes inside of dorm rooms, fraternity houses, and off-campus apartments. Contrasted against our reality it was easy to feel detached in many ways from the college experience. Every day I woke inside a two-man cell/bathroom the size of a closet. Everything I owned, my entire life crammed into my constricted living space. I brushed and flossed to the backdrops of metal doors clanking, of guard radios blaring. While my free classmates enjoyed Starbucks lattes and “mocha whatevers,” I headed to class, books in hand,

past incarcerated men still in various stages of their own prison mentalities—desperate, defeated, and dying—still without motivation to transcend their circumstances. Yet even they altered their interactions with us. I think we began to represent a new type of hope and possibility amongst the population at Patuxent. Everybody could see that we were dedicated to something greater than our worst mistakes. I think they respected our efforts.

We changed, inside our smaller little sheltered world within the condensed landscape of prison. It was impossible to ignore what was happening amongst us. We were operating and communicating with a level of unified focus that, in prison, was usually reserved for nefarious goals. I often asked myself throughout my years inside about the price of purchasing survival. In the end, would it be too high? More and more I found myself asking what my education was worth? The answer would always end up being the same—everything.

In the months before family day, we used to start marking the calendar. We would excuse offenses that normally ended in brawls and bloodshed, all just to make it and enjoy a day with the people that we loved. Still, in many ways the stakes were much higher for us now. Our degrees represented so much—so many different things to each of us. We, the convicted men with our checkered past in pursuit of a prize unheard of for people in our positions. We lived under a microscope, existing beneath a cloud that threatened rain and disappointments daily. We were expected to fail by everyone outside of our professors and program staff. We changed and shaped under these expectations into something unexpected—a cohort.

I remember when our professors started using the word “cohort” to identify us, I had no idea what it meant. The definition that I like the most for this word is “one of ten divisions of an ancient Roman legion.” I connect more with this meaning than any other because, in my opinion, it matches the situation of me and my classmates the most. I visualize the main campus of Georgetown as our home base, and we are a single legion out on an excursion, representing what it means to be a Hoya, even in the most adverse circumstances. I imagine that when a band of warriors form together for a common cause, there are divisions. Men hardly ever mesh well in the best of conditions; however, when there’s a goal greater than each individual’s desire, the best amongst men make it work.

The hopes of so, so many hang in the balance between us and our worst inclinations; no one wants to be the reason that so many mothers, fathers, spouses, and children lose the chance to see those they love transcending incarceration. The pursuit of my education and the stakes which I operate everyday remind me of my small-scale aspirations to make it to family day back in 2004. Back then, we all used to pray that there was no riot or other major incident to jeopardize the event. The thing was, back then there were

too many uncontrollable variables. We had no choice but to leave our fate in the hands of the unpredictable. Things are different now. As a student—alongside my cohort—with our individual motivations connected to our collective goal of graduation, I rest easy in that regard . . . most nights—none more so than the night after family day.

Picture the scene: Eighty degrees, sunny, a large grass covered field lined with picnic tables. A bounce house for the children, the smell of cotton candy and funnel cake wafting through the air. Missing is the tension of prisons; smiles rest peacefully on the faces of prisoners, family members, and correction officers clad in navy uniforms. All enclosed by barbed wire and watched by towers strategically positioned. This is the setting of family day 2023 at Patuxent—I sat there with my mother and brothers; their families present. I watched the children of my fellow cohort members run and play and eat. I felt the spirit of familial ties and friends transform a prison space into something out of place. As the typical tensions gave way to love I grew hopeful.

The last time I attended a prison family day was in 2004; back then, I was an inmate. I attended the same type of event this year at Patuxent Institution. I was still incarcerated, but I wasn't a prisoner—I was a student. The call came out for all of us who attend Georgetown to converge on the picture area. My fellow classmates and I began assembling for an impromptu class photo. Men pulled themselves away from the grasp of their loves and posed in front of the camera together. "That's right Georgetown!" I heard a woman yell in the distance, pride evidence within her voice. In that moment, I took a second and went into the place inside my mind where all my worries live, I turned off the lights, and I left my concerns unattended. I stood and smiled for our picture, comforted by the fact that at least in that moment, we were more than a cohort. We were family, even if only for a day.