

A FATHER'S JOURNEY THROUGH LOUISIANA'S CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

*Corey Ladd**

Although there are many fathers incarcerated in the state of Louisiana, I am quite sure only a handful fell into my unique category. On December 13, 2011, I was arrested for possession of marijuana. It was my third offense. Unable to make the extremely high bond, I was remanded to the Notorious House of Detention. For those who have never had the pleasure of spending the night in what we call "The House of Death," just know that it is everything you heard about and ten times worse. At that time, I was expecting the birth of my first child. I was certain that the courts would give me a break so that I could be there to see her birth. Boy, was I mistaken!

Not only did I miss the birth of my first child, I also missed her first steps, her first words, and pretty much every milestone a parent would cherish in his memory. I saw her one time in the courthouse, a beautiful little infant sleeping with a big bow on her head. I was not allowed to hold her or touch her. All I could do was gaze at her while her mother and my mother cried at the sight of me in an orange jumpsuit and shackles. That is the only memory I have of my daughter as an infant.

As I fought and fought to get out of jail, the State fought even harder to keep me in. I kept a clean conduct report amid the chaos surrounding me in jail. I took substance abuse class, the only self-help class in Orleans Parish at the time. I was accepted

* Corey Ladd has lived in Kenner, Louisiana most of his life. He is a graduate of Bonnabel Magnet High School. Mr. Ladd is the father to his six-year-old daughter who he currently cares for with the assistance of his parents. Prior to his daughter's birth, Mr. Ladd was arrested for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute. He was convicted and sentenced to twenty years in prison. While Mr. Ladd was in prison, his parents cared for his daughter. He struggled to maintain a relationship with his daughter because he was frequently placed in prisons far from Kenner. Mr. Ladd was eventually released on parole in 2017. His experience has motivated him to fight for other children of incarcerated parents who may not have grandparents to care for them and who are, at many times, forgotten by society. He shared his story at the Loyola Law Review's annual fall symposium.

into the Cenikor Intensive two-year drug rehabilitation program, but the courts told me that it was not enough time. I pleaded for drug court or the Angola re-entry program but was never even given the chance.

After eighteen months in the Orleans Parish jail, my lawyer came to see me, and it sounded like he had great news. He said the State wanted my friend more than they wanted me. I could go home to my daughter tomorrow if I would just take the stand and testify against him. Wow! Wasn't that just lovely? They wanted me to get on the stand and lie—not only lie, but ruin another father's relationship with his children just so they could get another non-violent offender behind bars. All I could say was: absolutely not. As my lawyer left, the tears came rushing in. All I could see in my head was my family crying, wondering why I could not do it for them, why I could not do it for my daughter.

In the next few weeks, I prepared for trial. If I was unable to get into the Angola re-entry program where I could learn a trade and come home to provide for my daughter, then so be it. They found me guilty and gave me a twenty-year sentence flat, day for day. I slept well at night knowing that they gave it to me while I reserved my right to appeal.

My first stop: Louisiana State Penitentiary. I got to meet my daughter Charlee for the first time in the visitation shed. By this time, she was already three years old. We had so much fun, I almost forgot I was in prison. Then, all of a sudden, after seven months, they shipped me out of the blue to a parish detention center all the way up north in Grayson, Louisiana. That was a hard blow for someone just starting a relationship with his child, especially while in school and self-help classes and keeping a clean conduct report. The Department of Corrections (DOC) obviously does not take any of these things into consideration when it transfers people. It would take seven months of writing to DOC, along with my mother and father sending their medical records and constantly calling, for me to finally get transferred to Elayn Hunt Correctional Center—only a forty-minute ride from my house. I was able to have visits with Charlee every other week, and I really started establishing a relationship with her. She was the only thing that kept me focused and determined to change.

Suddenly, I got a breakthrough in the courts. The Louisiana Supreme Court reversed and remanded my sentence back to district court for resentencing, citing Code of Criminal Procedure

article 894.1, and stating that the sentence seemed harsh at face value. I had been praying and praying that I would make it out in time to bring Charlee to start her first day a school, and it seemed that I was about to get that chance. I went back in front of the judge, and she basically told me she did not feel that the sentence was harsh, but to satisfy the supreme court, she took back the twenty years flat and gave me seventeen years flat.¹ Have a nice day!

By this time, I had come too far with my faith and rehabilitation to let this phase me. As I became closer and closer to my daughter, I fought harder than ever to get out. I spent countless hours studying the case law as I appealed my new seventeen-year sentence. Then came my next break: the appellate court reversed and remanded my sentence back to the district court for resentencing. The district attorney's office filed an appeal to the Louisiana Supreme Court.

As I spent long hours, weeks, and months fighting my case in court, I faced another terrible obstacle. Even though I was in school, took practically every self-help class available, and kept a flawless disciplinary report, I got shipped away again in the middle of the night. My mother did not believe me. She swore that I must have done something wrong. She thought there was no way they would move me like that unless I had done something bad. She called the warden, and they let her know that the DOC transfers whoever they want, whenever they want, no matter how good or how many classes they take.

By this time, I was in a privately-owned prison in Kinder, Louisiana. No self-help classes available, no chances of visitation with my child due to my parents' medical issues and inability to make the long drive. Nothing but knives and drugs around me. The courts and DOC were beating me down. I did not have much more fight left in me. I turned to drugs, all day and all night. I lost weight and passed out one day on the "walk."² Some friends carried me back to the dorm. After a few months of going hard, thinking I had been defeated, I called my mother and she told me that Charlee was unable to get in the charter school for pre-k, so they were going to wait until next year to enroll her in kindergarten. I started to remember my prayers and how far I had come. I felt like I was letting Charlee down. I shook off the

1. Resentencing, *State v. Ladd*, 2015 (No. 509017).

2. The "walk" is the fenced in walkway of the prison that leads to the yard or chow hall, for example.

addictive spirit and got clean. I frequented the church more and more. I began speaking words of life into my situation and over my daughter's life. Even though it was killing me inside that she thought I did not want to see her, I knew that one day she would understand.

"Knock Knock! Wake up, Mr. Ladd, it's time for your court trip." My nerves were extremely on edge. This was about two months before Charlee was supposed to start kindergarten. My whole family was there, the American Civil Liberties Union was there, and all I could focus on was my beautiful little girl. Finally, I was given my blessing! I was to be immediately released. After five and a half years, I finally got to go home and be a father!

It has been five months since my release, and as thankful as I am, sometimes when I look into Charlee's eyes, I see the eyes of all the children whose parents are still stuck in prison for serious amounts of time for non-violent offenses under Louisiana's draconian habitual offender law. I ask you to reflect on that for a moment. The pain and suffering I had to go through—getting shipped to far-away facilities and not being able to see or touch my child—not only took a toll on me but also on my family.

Louisiana is on the right path but still so very far from where we need to be. If we want people to be truly rehabilitated, and end the revolving door, we need to reevaluate many things. The justice reinvestment task force has their work cut out for them, but I have faith that they will make the changes we need to have a better community.

Children should be considered when sentencing low-level non-violent offenders. Children should also be considered when DOC transfers people across the state. I am not in any way making excuses for people who commit crimes, but there has to be some kind of system where families are not completely torn apart. It creates chaos in the communities and creates an environment where more people grow up distrusting authority. If my daughter had been forced to spend twenty years of her life with her father behind bars for a little bag of marijuana, how would she feel about the system? Thank God we will never know the answer to that question because I am doing everything I can to never miss another day of her life.

I thank everyone that participated and listened at the symposium. It was a pleasure to be there with the future

lawmakers and people who will make a difference. Remember that each one of us can make a difference, and together we can make a change!