

When I was ten years old, my mom was sentenced to prison for five years. I was just about to start 6th grade, and my greatest worries at the time were making friends and getting good grades, not my mother being taken away from me. When I was sad, needed advice, or just wanted to talk to my mom, I couldn't call her or come to her room like any other kid my age could. Instead of worrying about my mom being mad at me for spilling something, I worried about her surviving in a cinderblock building surrounded by wire fencing. My mom missed my birthdays, holidays, my graduation from middle school, and my freshman year of highschool. I saw her about two times a year, driving 8 hours to an upstate New York prison, playing Scrabble with her as she sat across me in an oversized green uniform under the watchful glare of correctional officers. There are over 2.5 million children in America who have or had an incarcerated parent, yet I felt ashamed and alone walking through school. Kids would be talking to each other about life's daily, mundane things, and all I could think about was my mom being in prison. It felt like a shameful and terrifying secret, weighing me down. I never saw any resources for kids like me, I never knew any kids who were going through what I was going through. I felt utterly alone, like in those high school movies where that one kid is standing in the middle of a sea of students. Middle school, an already challenging transitional period, combined with the incarceration of my mom, was the most depressing time in my life.

My mother got out at the start of last fall. She lives apart from me, and struggles financially. I get to see her on my own terms now, but a parole officer still visits her apartment unannounced.

As I went through my sophomore year, I looked back at my visits to those prisons, remembering the small toddlers and angsty teens visiting their mothers. I wondered if their mothers also got out of prison, or were their families still driving hours to see them? I wondered if they had gone numb to the disappointment of their mom missing Christmas and birthdays, or did they also quietly cry about it? I wondered if they too felt as alone and ashamed as I did. I realized that I couldn't just close off that chapter of my life without helping these kids, kids who were going through the same thing that I went through. I realized that I never wanted another person to feel the same loneliness

and helplessness as I did, whether or not they were in the same situation as I was. This realization, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic inspired me to start Helping Hands.

Children of incarcerated parents were always in the back of my mind. This past fall, our goal was to raise money for a non-profit, Prison Fellowship, to provide Christmas gifts for children of incarcerated parents on behalf of their parents. I knew that in order for this project to be successful, I had to be vulnerable about my own past experience with an incarcerated mom. It was surreal and cathartic to describe what I had gone through to the tens of Helping Hands members over zoom after feeling so much shame about the topic over the years. But I knew that this wasn't about me, this was about the invisible 2.5 million children in America who have/had an incarcerated parent. I wanted my peers to be aware of the impact of incarceration on families, both financially and emotionally. My vulnerability and our hard fundraising work paid off. By creating awareness posts, getting an interview with a celebrity, and getting published in news articles, we managed to raise almost \$7000 dollars for children of incarcerated parents, providing about 300 children with presents this Christmas. The first time we hit our goal- \$1000- I cried. I never expected that my dream to help people who suffered like me would be so successful. While the money raised was amazing, the most memorable moment was having members of Helping Hands reach out to me and share their own experiences with incarcerated parents. Knowing that there were people out there who felt supported because I had shared my own experience with incarceration made me feel like everything was worth it.

Prior to the launch of Helping Hands, I wasn't confident in my leadership and public speaking abilities, and was terrified of mentioning my mom to anyone. Now, by speaking openly about my struggles with incarceration and our community's projects to a large audience on Zoom, by seeing my dreams become reality, as cheesy as it sounds, I realize that I am capable of much more than I thought. I also realize how important it is to continue to reach out and help others, even during times of struggle, whether personal or global, like a pandemic.

I hope to continue Helping Hands in the future, throughout college and even past that. However, while Helping Hands has allowed me to turn a negative into a positive, my mom's incarceration still has a profound and harsh impact on me. She cannot

financially support me, and my dad has to support me and my three other siblings by himself. Still, I believe that overcoming adversity highlights our perseverance. I hope to provide the helping hand that I wish I had to people suffering through isolation, and make them feel loved, even for a little bit.