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These Broward siblings struggled visiting their dad in prison. Here's what they did about it

By CLARA-SOPHIA DALY | August 29, 2024



Brother and sister, Joshua, left, and Ava Martoma, right, founders of the non-profit KidsMates are photographed at the Federal Correction Institution in southwest Miami-Dade where their father was once incarcerated. CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com

Every Saturday morning without fail, siblings Joshua, Ava, and David Martoma used to wake up before sunrise, get dressed and pile into their mom's car to drive down to the Federal Correctional Institution in southwest Miami-Dade to visit with their father in prison. They would often spend the ride asleep in the back seat.

The family would arrive at the prison gates before they opened – waiting for half an hour before going in and visiting with their father, Mathew Martoma, who was serving a 9-year sentence.

After going through the prison security screening, the siblings and their mom would enter the waiting room and spend the next hours seated on the hard plastic chairs inside the visitation room, talking to their father. Their visit would end abruptly at 10:30 a.m. when inmates were called back for an official count.

There wasn't much to do in the visitation room in those early years. The kids, who were ages 9, 7 and 5 when their father went to prison, couldn't bring anything with them to the visitation area — no books, no toys, no games. The area had a small shelf with a few tattered old books and encyclopedias. The families would use the books as lap tables to eat their snacks from the vending machines — high-sugar treats like Honey Buns and Big Texas Cinnamon Rolls. They would avoid the moldy hoagies.

The lack of activities available in the room could make the visits feel tedious, so Ava and Joshua wanted to know how they could get games and books into the prison. They were told that donations could only be accepted from nonprofits, so that's when they decided to start one.

"We were like, okay, let's jump the hurdle," said Ava, who is now 17.

With the help of their mom, they created [KidsMates](#) and got their first book donations from the library at their own school, Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale. The nonprofit has since expanded to be an online resource for parents, children and educators, and the siblings have partnered with other organizations to educate the public about how best to cope with having an incarcerated parent, as well as push for criminal justice policy reforms.

After dropping off their first book donations, kids were no longer running around the visiting room getting in trouble. Now, kids sat quietly and read with their parents, an activity that research shows has many benefits including cognitive development and familial bonding.

"I loved having the books there because I love to read, and I love that other people were also enjoying being able to read in the prisons," said Ava.

Since forming KidsMates, the group has donated 5,000 books, games, and movies to federal prison visiting rooms in 23 states.

"Our love of education is the whole reason KidsMates started," said Ava.

Their love of education also kept them close to their father while he was incarcerated. The siblings would mail their schoolwork to their father in prison so he could go over it – and during the visitation sessions, they would discuss it. They would tell him about their lives and days and give each other hugs.

Criminal justice reform advocates say that children with incarcerated parents often struggle in school because their home lives become unstable.



The Martoma siblings pose for a photo near books they plan to donate to prison waiting rooms.
Dr. Rosemary Martoma

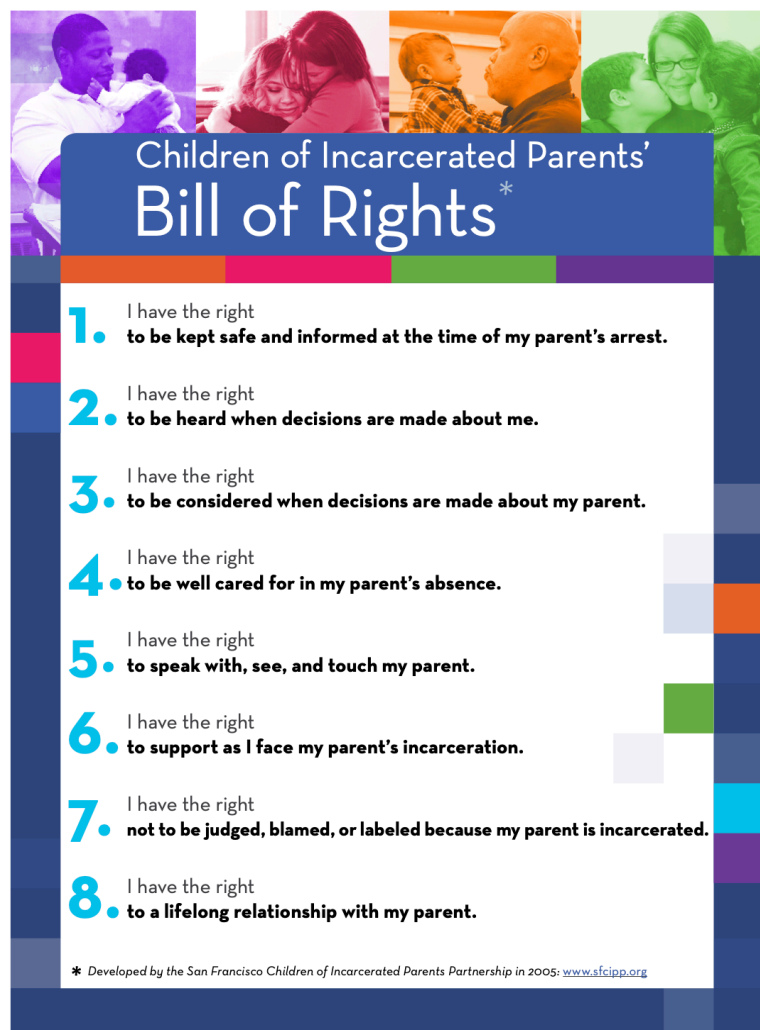
But through visits and other strong adult relationships, the Martoma children were able to manage the trauma of having a parent in prison. Part of their organization's mission is to give children tools to be resilient.

Ava is now in her senior year of high school at Pine Crest High and spent part of her summer in Boston at an MIT program focused on engineering and STEM.

Her younger brother David is 15 and entered his freshman year of high school. He is the youngest youth fellow at Worth Rises!, a national nonprofit that works to expand the discourse around the commercialization of the criminal legal system. He has partnered with a professor to research the pros and cons of allowing prisoners to access modern technology.

KidsMates has a website to provide kids with incarcerated parents a place to find stories from others who have gone through the same thing. The organization also works to end the stigma around having incarcerated parents by launching public awareness campaigns, often with larger non-profits such as the Osborne Association, an organization that provides support to people who have been in conflict with the law and their families.

They helped create a Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights, which includes, "I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest," and "I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent." Their website also offers resources for teachers, counselors, and caregivers on how to create a learning environment free of stigma.



The poster features a header with the title "Children of Incarcerated Parents' Bill of Rights*" and a list of eight rights. The background of the poster is a collage of photos showing families and children. The text is presented in a clean, modern font with numbered list items.

1. I have the right **to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.**
2. I have the right **to be heard when decisions are made about me.**
3. I have the right **to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.**
4. I have the right **to be well cared for in my parent's absence.**
5. I have the right **to speak with, see, and touch my parent.**
6. I have the right **to support as I face my parent's incarceration.**
7. I have the right **not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.**
8. I have the right **to a lifelong relationship with my parent.**

* Developed by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership in 2005: www.sfcipp.org



New York Initiative for
Children of Incarcerated Parents



www.osborneny.org/susu
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[@OsborneNY](https://twitter.com/OsborneNY)
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The Martoma siblings contributed to The Children of Incarcerated Parent's Bill of Rights, created for the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents. Courtesy of the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents.

Allison Hollihan, who works for the Osborne Association and directs the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, said that Martoma children's experience is important to share.

Hollihan began working with Ava and Joshua when they joined the "See Us, Support Us" youth team.

The project provides resources to educators such as how to use humanizing language and lists of books about children with incarcerated parents. Ava has created [artwork](#) for the project, and spoken on [panels](#) with other youth — discussing what helps and hinders their educational success and well-being.

"They are passionate and they have really great ideas for policy and practice changes because they understand the challenge of having an incarcerated parent and they know how important visiting is," she said.

'KIDS CAN FEEL THAT THEY'RE RESPONSIBLE'

The Martoma siblings' father Mathew Martoma was convicted of insider trading in one of the most lucrative schemes of all time, according to a Department of Justice report from the time. Martoma was a hedge fund trader who was found guilty for advising his clients to sell shares of pharmaceutical companies based on insider tips.

But the Martoma children do not speak much of the crime their father was convicted for, emphasizing that their father's actions do not define them.

One of the goals of their organization is to allow children to feel less alone.

In the United States, a sizable number of children have had a parent or guardian incarcerated.

Although the data relies heavily on self-reporting, and thus is largely an undercount, data from 2019 shows that about 4.9 million children in the nation lived with a parent or guardian who served jail or prison time, according to The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. It's research found that 12 percent of Black children had an incarcerated parent. Those numbers are even more stark for American Indians and Alaska Natives at 16 percent. Only 6 percent of white children had a parent that was incarcerated.

About 15-20 percent of children in the child welfare system have an incarcerated parent, according to a study from Rutgers University National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated.

Shame and stigma are some of the biggest challenges for those children — they are often afraid to tell their friends or teachers for fear of judgment.

"There is so much learned shame, so for them to come out and just be authentic, and to live their truth, has done so much for other young people who can see themselves in Josh and Ava," said Hollihan.

According to Hollihan, there are many instances where young children do not fully understand what it means for their parent to be incarcerated and will blame themselves.

Hollihan said one child who came to the Osborne Association was told his mother was in the “hospital,” instead of in detention. The young child would hurt himself on the playground because he wanted to go to the hospital because he believed his mom was there.

During their visits and phone calls, the Martoma’s father never shared any details about any difficulties he was having inside. He always kept things to himself, sheltering his children from the harsh realities of prison, they said.

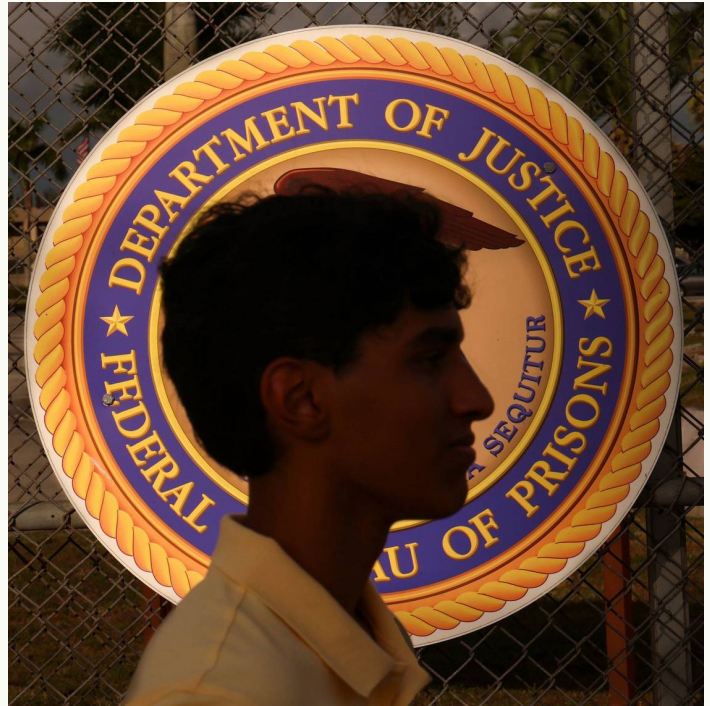
As they got older, they began to learn more about the criminal justice system and saw the lack of resources for children with incarcerated parents. And they were able to see that, though their family was suffering through the stress of having an incarcerated parent, there were other children whose families had fewer resources that were going through the same experience. That’s when they expanded their nonprofit beyond book donations.

Now, the nonprofit partners with other organizations that advocate for national legislation to support children with incarcerated parents. Those drafting legislation were interested in hearing directly from children who knew first-hand what it was like to have a parent in prison, so Ava and Joshua were able to share their story to inform the policy-making.

They advocated for the proximity bill in New York which works to place inmates in prisons in closer proximity to their children — decreasing the long travel often required to visit parents who are in prisons in remote areas.

Ava worked on legislation that aims to abolish the loophole in the 13th Amendment which allows unpaid labor from those who have been convicted of crimes.

They advocated for New York’s Bail Elimination Act, which works to remove bail requirements for non-violent crimes. They worked to secure free prison phone calls in Miami, Milwaukee, California, and Connecticut in partnership with another nonprofit.



Joshua Martoma, founder of the non-profit called “KidMates” is photographed at the Federal Correction Institution Miami where his father was once incarcerated in south Miami-Dade on Wednesday, June 6, 2024. KidMates supports children whose parents are incarcerated. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com

They also advocate for the right to be able to have in-person visits. Since the pandemic, many prisons and jails across the country have not opened up for in-person visitation, instead relying on video and phone visits. In Florida, prisons are open for family visits but Miami-Dade County jails are completely closed to family members.

Ava and Joshua have also served as youth representatives on multiple boards, including the [Family Based Justice Center's](#) Advisory Board. "They were very mature, they were very confident in how they spoke," said Isabel Coronado, who also served on the board.

When Joshua and Ava were young, they remember feeling awkward when friends would ask them to have a play date on the weekend, and they had to explain that their father was in prison.

When Joshua lost a friend, he recalls wondering whether it was because of his father's incarceration.

"I fell victim in the beginning of trying to not talk about it because I knew it was probably not the most pleasant school lunch conversation," said Joshua, now 18, who started UC Berkeley this fall on a full scholarship.

But their mother Dr. Rosemary Martoma, a pediatrician, taught her children that they did not have to feel ashamed of their father's incarceration.

"I think a lot of kids can feel that they're responsible in some way when their parents goes away," said Ava. "That's why at KidsMates a lot of our advocacy work is being honest with the children and separating the idea that their parent being in prison is the core of their identity."



Brother and sister, Ava, left, and Joshua Martoma, right, stand across the street of the Federal Correction Institution Miami where their father was once incarcerated. As kids, they would visit their father every weekend in prison. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com