



Jose Hamza Saldana, Director, Release Aging People in Prison/RAPP

## Reflection Piece

### **On February 8, 1980, I was arrested.**

At the time, I was 28-years old and the father of four small children, ages one to eight-years old: Malik (1), Kisha (4), Serge (5) and Kendra (8). That day I did not return home. The next time they would see me was in a courtroom handcuffed to a chain wrapped around my waist and leg shackles. Seeing me this way must have shocked, if not terrified them. They had no idea of the many ways their young lives would be disrupted, and neither did I. From this day forward they would be among the millions of children with an incarcerated parent such as Pete Jr. and his sibling were, as depicted in *Run For His Life*.

At the time, there was little, if any, research or studies on the adverse impact of parental incarceration on children. It would be years before their experience would even be included in the Child Psychology category of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE).

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Kendra would blame her mother for my absence. This was just the beginning of a lifetime of psychological and emotional trauma and harm they would individually endure.

The first decade of imprisonment was the most difficult for my children, especially for Kisha and Serge. I tried to be a part of their everyday lives, to stay connected to them, through costly visits, phone calls, lots of letters, cards and avant-garde gifts. The question they would always ask me was, "Daddy, when are you coming home?" The only answer I had for them was, "Soon." One day I called home and my youngest daughter answered the phone, and asked, "Daddy, when are you coming home and don't tell me soon, because I know soon means never. All I could say was "Baby, I don't know when I'm coming home, but I'm trying to do everything I can, to be with you and never leave you again." I should have closely examined how my incarceration was affecting her, all of them, but I was too engrossed in overturning my conviction to see the harm and hurt they had been enduring in silence for years.

During Serge's mid teenage years, he started to distance himself from me. He gradually stopped coming with his mother to visit me and would not respond to my letters or talk to me on the phone. My brothers tried to spend more time with him, taking him to Yankees games, and community sponsored father-son basketball games and doing the things I would have been doing with him. But he wouldn't open up to them about what he was going through. He was often angry for no apparent reason and basically just wanted to be left alone. Eventually, he started to gravitate to the street lifestyle. I felt helpless, but I wasn't going to give up on him. So, I kept writing to him, and sending him books to read, like the Autobiography of Malcolm X, and books about political and grassroots movements for racial and social justice in America, trying to help him develop social consciousness and perspectives to navigate through the many pitfalls he would confront.

In the early '90s Serge was arrested. He was 17-years old and facing a life sentence. This is a nightmare that all incarcerated fathers dread, seeing their sons in prison with them or knowing that somewhere in the prison system their son is in a prison cell. Incarcerated fathers with their sons in prison— one of the worst evils resulting from the discriminatory policies of mass incarceration. Grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters; generation after generation imprisoned at the same time, and mostly from Black and Brown communities. Families devastated from generation to generation. This is the reality of mass incarceration, of a criminal legal system bent on perpetual punishment and revenge. Black kids targeted as super-predators and laws enacted to prosecute them as adults. Kids the same age as Serge, were coming to prisons across New York State with life sentences, sentences that were virtual death by incarceration. If this was happening to White families at the same magnitude, there would be mass outrage. I could not allow Serge to suffer the same fate as me. For months, I wrote hundreds of letters to attorneys, to everyone I could think of, or heard about, asking them to help my son. A couple of old friends talked with defense attorney Lynne Stewart, and she agreed to take Serge's case.

Watching *Run for His Life* awakened some of the most private and emotional periods of my life in prison. I am also a runner. I spent decades running in prison yards, from prison to prison. When Serge was arrested, I was in Shawangunk Correctional facility, which has the largest prison yard in the NYS prison system. Sometimes I would run the yard for the entire recreation period, 2½ hours. In a very personal way, I can relate to Pete's running. I know what it's like to "run for his life." Running is where all my thoughts came together, when I could focus on the one goal, saving my son's life. If I failed him now, there would be no one left. "I will not fail him; we will not fail," became my mantra while I was running. The system had failed him and would continue to fail him. It was all up to me. I talked to my son's spirit, wrote him letters, worked to develop legal strategies, and when I would start to get tired, I would pick up the pace - refusing to surrender. "I will not fail him; we will not fail." *Run for His Life* brought it all back to the present. The emotions and tears I had suppressed for a lifetime were finally released. **I Thank Pete, Jr. for the positive energy.**

The first letter Serge sent me from Rikers Island pre-trial detention revealed that he had been reading my letters and gave me a detailed account of what had happened. At the time, I was a part of a movement that swept the New York prison system, the Resurrection Study Group, which espoused "The Non-Traditional Approach to Criminal and Social Justice It was founded by two New York prison pioneers, Eddie Ellis and Larry White. The first lesson I learned in the Resurrection Study Group was the Three Rules that would become my guiding principles: 1) Get out of prison as soon as possible; 2) Get out of prison a better man; and, 3) Help others live by these same three rules. These three simple rules would govern my decision-making process. I passed these three rules to Serge and just about everything of value that I had learned from the lessons of my experience and the experiences of others, including my experience of having been through seven trials. Over the years Serge and I learned from each other and developed the most profound relationship between a father and son. The prosecutor had offered Serge a plea bargain that included an 18-year prison sentence. His co-defendants took the plea offer. Serge followed my advice to reject the plea offer, and together, we prepared for trial.

In the mid '90s I got an unexpected visit from my youngest daughter, Kisha. During the visit she told me that she grew up secretly resenting me for not being there for her. She went on to mention every birthday, graduation, holiday or special occasion in her life that I had missed and ended with, "You weren't there for me when I needed you the most, when you were the only one I wanted to talk to. And, I would just cry, and no one would know why I was crying." I tried to explain to her that I never abandoned her or her sister and brothers, that the criminal-legal system took me away from her. But, she just looked at me with sad, tearful eyes and whispered, "What does all that mean to a little girl who just wants her daddy home?" All I could do was hug her and tell her how much I have always and will always love her and how sorry I am for every single day I wasn't there for her. I promise that I would find a way to somehow make it all up to her. By this time, I had started to develop insight into the devastating psychological, and emotional harm that my four innocent children individually suffered and endured for nearly their

entire lives. Later on, I would learn that the four of them had made a secret pact that none of them would have children for fear of their children experiencing what they went through. They never spoke a word of this to their mother.

Awaiting trial for nearly five years, Serge had developed into an intelligent, conscious and responsible young man. He had a reputable defense attorney, a team of the best jailhouse lawyers (incarcerated people who take an active role in their defense or others') in prison, and me to help him prepare for trial. After a jury trial he was acquitted of all charges and walked out the courtroom a free Black man, a **survivor of the system**. The next day he came to visit me, before leaving New York City to go North Carolina to live with his older sister, Kendra. He told me about the secret pact they made to never have children. Every year, he would drive to New York City with Kendra to spend some time with their mother and visit me. Kisha married and sent me lots of beautiful pictures of the wedding. On the back of one of the pictures she wrote: "I thought I would be over this by now, I'm not. I wish you were here. I miss you." This was another special occasion in her life that I was not there for. This harm doesn't magically disappear, and they don't outgrow it.



*Pete and his siblings with their father*

Millions of children, mostly Black and Brown, are living with the Adverse Child Experience (ACE) of having an incarcerated parent, which has been recognized by practitioners of child psychology. If the majority of those children were White, the State would have

likely provided an abundance of social services to help them heal and grow-up as healthy human beings. From kindergarten to the 12th grade, counseling would have been available to them. Should it not be our responsibility, as a community, to make these services available to our children? Or, do we wait and depend on the System to provide such services for our children?

I shared my children's experiences with my closest friends. We all had similar experiences. We formed a small support group, a safe space for us to share our most personal fears and worries for the lives, safety and health of our children. This led to broader on-going group discussions on the traumatic impact and stigma of having an incarcerated parent, how to identify the common symptoms, and what we can do to lessen the harm they silently endure. We organized the first workshop entitled, "Invisible Victims: Children of Incarcerated Parents." We developed programs like, "Fathering from Afar," to help us be better fathers, to help

us come to terms with the decisions we made that took us away from our children, and to accept that we had a better choice than the ones we made. If we are to be a meaningful part of the solution to end the criminalization of our youth and mass incarceration, we must accept some responsibility for leaving our vulnerable children at the mercy of a system that does not give equal value to their humanity.



It is difficult to acknowledge our failures and shortcomings as fathers. We all like to think we are candidates for ‘Father of the Year Award.’ Myself included. One member of the group talked about how disappointed he was that his 18-year-old daughter was a gang member. When it was suggested that maybe she was looking to belong to a family who could relate to her and love her. His response was, “She couldn’t ask for a better father,” yet he had been in prison her entire life. The only memories she had of her dad were from prison visiting rooms. No memories of him at her earliest birthdays, or special moments that would stay with her for a lifetime. There was silence in the room. My youngest son, Malik, was one year old when I was arrested. He missed those wondrous memories too. Too many of our children have that void in their lives. We have to help heal them. If we don’t, who will? How do we, as incarcerated parents and people of color, help our children who are, at this very moment, suffering in silence, from deeply rooted psychological and emotional pain and living with the stigma of having an incarcerated parent? Where do we start to correct this and ensure that this does not continue to happen again and again?

An awful truth is that interpersonal violence in our communities, the taking away of precious life or selling of drugs devastates families and communities. As we search for viable strategies, we can’t ignore the mothers who continue to lose teenage sons to gun violence, the Black on Black gun violence, the rampant drug addiction among young people, or that one of three Black women/girls are victims of sexual violence. When White people started dying of opioid overdoses, it became a public health crisis. In the Black communities, it threatened public safety, so the “War on Drugs” was launched against the community - the same problem, with two different solutions. Do we continue to allow people who are complicit in enforcing the racist policies of mass incarceration to identify the problems and solutions for us or do we address these critical life and death issues in a holistic way that does not ignore or cause more harm? Individual responsibility and accountability are critical steps toward collectively repairing this harm that is so prevalent in our communities and toward developing a system of criminal justice that is not founded on permanent punishment, revenge and separation of families. We have to be our own liberators.

From prison to prison across the State of New York our group taught the concept of **'Invisible Victims'** to incarcerated fathers, grandfathers and anyone concerned with the impact of mass incarceration on Black and Latinx families. We discussed the history of racial oppression and the movements that evolved to resist racial and social injustice, the roots to the economic and social conditions in our communities, crime generative factors that perpetuate the cycle of generational poverty. We also discussed individual responsibility and accountability to the community. Our vision is to build a movement that transforms "justice" from a racist punitive concept to one that values the humanity and dignity of all people, with a focus on redemption, transformation, and individual responsibility. Are those, including myself, who had harmed people in our communities, accountable to the community? Those of us, who have been a part of the Resurrection Study Group have developed a sense of community, a moral obligation to help repair and not ignore harm. We strive to be 'returning citizens' in the truest sense of the term. Our communities should expect or accept no less from us.

I was finally released from prison in 2018, after 38-years of imprisonment. I was 66-years old when I walked out of prison -- a survivor of the system. I left men behind, fathers and grandfathers, who are just as worthy and should have been walking out of prison with me, if not before me. Had we sat in a prison classroom watching *Run for His Life*, it would have brought every one of us to our knees and inspired greater commitment and sacrifice. I will not go on with my life as if they never existed.

Today, Kendra is the published author of "Shades between Reality and the Dream." She does not have any children. She lives in Charlotte, NC. Serge is a manager in a department store. He lives with his girlfriend of twenty-years in Charlotte, NC. He doesn't have any children. Kisha is a masseuse, aspiring to be the owner of a Massage Parlor. She lives with her husband and 8-year-old daughter in NYC. Malik is still pursuing his childhood dream of becoming a film producer. He has an 8-year-old daughter and lives in New York City. I am the Director of Release Aging People in Prison Campaign (RAPP), a grassroots community organization and advocacy campaign co-founded by a collective of formerly incarcerated people. RAPP works to end mass incarceration and promote racial justice through the release of older and aging people in prison and those serving long-term prison sentences as a means of uprooting greater forces of injustice that upholds the legacy of racism and the control of communities of color. I am also a Board Member of Mott Haven Reformed Church's Children's Haven, a project that addresses the special needs of children with an incarcerated parent in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, NY. I live in New York City and have been married to my childhood sweetheart for over two decades.

## Questions:

- What does *Run For His Life* teach about the importance of fatherhood? How do you think Pete Jr. and Pete Sr. have been able to maintain their strong bond despite Pete Sr's incarceration?
- How do you think the community could have supported Pete Jr. and his family after Pete Sr's incarceration?

## Resources:

Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP): [rappcampaign.com](http://rappcampaign.com)

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