Parents trying to navigate New York’s juvenile justice system seek help and support from Bronx advocate

Jeanette Bocanegra, mother of a jailed youth, helps others with incarcerated kids

BY CORINNE LESTCH / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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Beatriz Maldonado hugs Jeanette Bocanegra (R) as her son, Carem watches

Beatriz Maldonado was so desperate to see her teenage son at Horizon Juvenile Center, she left her 4-year-old with a woman she just met.

Maldonado’s little boy, Carem, was not allowed to enter Horizon because of his age, and she sat crying in a nearby Burger King.

Jeanette Bocanegra was outside Horizon distributing brochures about Community Connections for Youth, an organization that supports families of incarcerated youth, and spotted Maldonado.

"I asked her if everything was okay," Bocanegra, 46, recalled. "She said she wasn't able to visit her son." Bocanegra offered – if he didn’t cry – to watch Carem so Maldonado could visit Franklin, 13, whom she hadn’t seen in a week.

"I was in shock that I would find someone like her that cared so much," Maldonado, 37, recalled a year later. "Right away, I felt her reaching out to people and wanting to help."
As the holidays approach, Bocanegra is busy helping families whose children are transitioning from upstate facilities as part of the Close to Home initiative.

“She’s like a magnet for families,” said Rev. Ruben Austria, executive director of CCFY, who hired Bocanegra full-time 15 months ago. “She breaks the ice with people really quickly and lets them know it’s a safe place.”

And Bocanegra relates with families on a personal level: her youngest son has been in and out of youth facilities since he was 14.

“I lost his 15th, 16th and 17th birthdays,” she said with a sigh.

As she visited him and started learning about “the system,” she became obsessed with finding out what, exactly, these facilities offered troubled youth.

“I would just observe other families and their children and say, ‘This kid don’t even belong here – this is a child with special needs,’” she said. “I saw families that didn’t speak English. Who’s helping these families?”

Until their kids get back home, many Bronx families have turned to monthly support sessions at CCFY. The dozen participants endure a rollercoaster of emotions as Bocanegra, her dark brown dreadlocks spilling out of bright blue and pink scarves wrapped tightly around her head, tries to balance their tears with her upbeat personality.

Maldonado, a fixture at the Mott Haven office since the encounter at Burger King, described how her son Franklin - who has a history of robbery and assault charges - was re-arrested after a six-month stint at Lincoln Hall, a private placement facility.

“He came home with tattoos, a different attitude,” she said “I don’t know my son at all. What really hurts me is that he’s only 13.”

Another parent started crying when she explained that her 14-year-old at Highland Residential Center, a youth prison nearly two hours north of the city, has special needs.

Addressing the parents Bocanegra said, “One of the most difficult things is to go home and know your son’s bed is empty. Is he being abused?”

For Bocanegra, the line blurs between her work and personal life. Parents call her cell phone at night. She was supposed to take a week off in October, but she ended up in her familiar office near the Third Ave. Bridge.

“I had a parent that called to tell me her 17-year-old son had been beaten up by a Correction officer and was badly hurt,” she said. “So I gave her the number for a lawyer from the Prisoner’s Rights Project.”

When she goes home, the mother of six grown children sees the empty bed and thinks of her own son. She wonders what she could have done differently.

He was a freshman at DeWitt Clinton High School when he started getting into trouble, and the school called the police after he was allegedly involved in a robbery there.

“I had a meeting with the principal, the guidance counselor, the parent coordinator,” Bocanegra said. “I said, ‘Can we get my son out of here? He can’t be in this large school.’ They were like, ‘No, he’s going to be fine.’”

Now, while his classmates are well into their senior year, her son has accumulated only 15 credits inside the various centers.

“And you want to send these kids back to our families, our community, so angry?” Bocanegra asked. “And then what? Am I supposed to give up on my son and let the system take over?”