*Note: This is a transcript of the speech I wrote and delivered on May 11, 2011 for the New Jersey Youth Development Forum, Fragile Families, Princeton University Woodrow Wilson School*

For the past nine months I have been proudly serving the country as an AmeriCorps VISTA and coordinator of New Jersey’s Amachi Break the Cycle Project. Amachi BTC’s mission is to stop intergenerational incarceration by matching children of prisoners with community mentors. By looking at the staggering numbers and statistics one will see that this is no small task.

According to the Department of Corrections, about 62,000 New Jersey children have one or more parent in prison. Children experience their parent’s incarceration as a loss, similar to the loss a child might feel losing a parent to illness. They feel abandoned and they often feel at fault. Visiting is stressful and scary and witnessing the arrest of a parent is traumatizing. Couple loss, trauma, guilt and instability with poverty and an environment of crime and you have the seeds of a vicious cycle. These children’s lives are written about and spoken of using ominous vocabulary and language. Children of prisoners are referred to as “the invisible population”, “the next generation of prisoners”, “collateral damage” and included as part of a “vicious intergenerational cycle.” Research unanimously implies that these children are more likely than their peers to become involved in drug and alcohol abuse, drop out of school, and/ or become offenders themselves.

Just saying these sentences makes me feel discouraged and overwhelmed. I am, however, buoyed by the body of research that demonstrates the efficacy of mentoring. According to a Family and Corrections Network report, mentoring programs for children of prisoners have been proven to improve children’s socio-emotional skills, increase their capacity for attachments and produce stronger, healthier relationships between children and others, leading to better outcomes in social and academic competence. Mentoring also benefits the community by fostering and encouraging volunteerism, understanding and tolerance.

When I started with AmeriCorps in August 2010, I was excited to begin fighting the war on poverty and start making a difference. Quickly, I discovered that my enthusiasm was no match for some of the structural and funding barriers we would face. In 2008, the North Western New Jersey Community Action Program ambitiously hoped to begin a statewide mentoring organization modeled after the Amachi Project. The Amachi project was founded in 2001 in Philadelphia by Public and Private Ventures and the former Mayor, Dr. Rev. Goode. The North Western New Jersey Community Action Program received funding from the Nicolson Foundation and was approved for an AmeriCorps VISTA grant from the Corporation for National Community Service. The program was to be sponsored by New Jersey’s Retired Senior Volunteer Program. When I began my term, there were nine VISTAs covering twelve of New Jersey’s counties. Today we are down to five counties and five VISTAs. When the project began in 2008, it was really little more than an idea. There was no social worker, no policies or procedures and no established partnerships.

In the two years before I came on board, the VISTAs who preceded me did an enormous amount of work on capacity building and partnerships. They established Memorandums of Understanding which required that VISTAs be responsible for identifying children of prisoners and recruiting mentors in each organization’s respective counties. In return the organizations would be responsible for facilitating the match process and supervision. Some of these organizations included Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club, Catholic Charities and Mentoring Plus. The VISTAs established positive relationships with these organizations, acting as recruiting arms, but unfortunately there was still a good deal of disconnect. Additionally, a lack of interest from several of the Retired Senior Volunteer Programs that were meant to sponsor and sustain the program made progress difficult and eventually the program was pulled from all but five counties.

The project remains active in Passaic, Hunterdon, Morris, Warren and Sussex Counties. Our current partner, Just 1 Mentoring, is a brand new community based project that aims to pair children of prisoners who are ages four to eighteen with positive role models. Mentors spend an hour per week for at least one year with their mentee engaging in recreational activities, attending events or helping with homework. We’ve been helping them build their program since April and after this week I will be able to happily say that the first two matches have been made. Unfortunately, Just 1 will be losing all its federal funding on October 1st.

As we look for new funding avenues, I am encouraged by the attention that Amachi BTC has already brought to this population. One of the most positive outcomes of this project has been making an invisible population visible. Recently I inspired one of Somerset County’s Freeholders to speak with the Prosecutors office about implementing more child friendly arrest protocols in homes where children are present. Our VISTA leader got officials in Mercer County to, when reviewing juvenile criminal cases, explore whether an absentee parent is incarcerated and then make case recommendations from there. Another colleague makes regular appearances on a radio show in Sussex County. Just 1 Mentoring was recently featured in the Star Ledger.

I am happy to be here today because my greatest fear is that when my AmeriCorps term is over, the children of prisoners will fall right back into the shadows. I hope that you, as policy makers and change agents, will consider implementing or helping to support a statewide mentoring program for children of prisoners. I recommend that the organization be capable of conducting its own recruiting, screening processes, trainings and match supervision. I would also recommend that a strong partnership be established with the Department of Corrections well before the program begins. Using paid mentors and/ or making the program site-based would make volunteer recruitment go more smoothly. I also think that children of prisoners would benefit from a visitation program because kids should have the right to see, hear and touch their mom or dad. It has been proven that parents who maintain more frequent contact with their children have lower rates of recidivism. Implementing parenting classes that involve interactive prison visits from inmate’s children would also benefit kids and families.

This past Wednesday, three of my fellow VISTAs and I met with social workers at Passaic County Jail. We also had the opportunity to take a tour and speak with a group of inmates about how their incarceration has affected their relationships with their children. It tore me apart. One man told us that his children believe that he is not in jail, but rather working in a toy store in Georgia. His five-year-old son wets the bed, his six-year-old daughter is self-conscious about her weight, and his sixteen-year-old daughter is getting into all kinds of trouble at school. He blames himself. Another man told us that he is a Latin King who grew up on the streets of Paterson, never feeling love for or from anyone until he met his two daughters. Pictures of a tattooed, rough looking man playing tea party with his two little girls were painted for us. Then he left us with the image of a defeated father crying with his bereaved daughters through a plexiglass window in a jail visiting booth.

The meaning of the word mentor is derived from a combination of the Greek words *mentos* which means “with purpose, spirit and passion” and *meno* which means “to remain, abide, continue, be present, wait and endure.” To me, this definition seems to be the embodiment of the elements, a spirited deliverance of purpose and stability, that children of prisoners most need.