THIS IS HOW THEY PUNISH BAD GIRLS

welcome to the grim world of a juvenile jail.

by diane

photography: jan sonnenmair special thanks to the national girls caucus & the pace center for girls, inc.

6:00 AM I am sitting in the parking lot of the Ventura School, the coed maximum-security juvenile lockup facility in the sleepy town of Camarillo, California. My heart is racing. For two reasons. I just nearly drove my gray Ford Escort rental into a ditch, and I am about to spend 16 hours inside the disheartening environment of juvenile criminals convicted of violent crimes, like murder, robbery and assault. While I'm feeling a little apprehensive, I remember my reasons for wanting to do this story. Crime is a part of all of our lives. The number of violent young offenders is rapidly growing—especially among girls. Consider these figures: In 1983 there were 7,115 girls under 18 arrested for violent crimes. In 1992 there were 13,011. That's an 83 percent increase. So there's definitely cause to be concerned. But I also wanted to understand how these girls got here and whether jailing them is truly a solution.

There are bushes and grass in front of the single-level building. It looks ready for an outpouring of kids wearing low-riding jeans with oversized tees, shouting and laughing at each other. Only this is no ordinary school. The spiraling razor wire on the roof tells me so.

6:20 AM I meet the tour guide for the first eight-hour leg of my stay, Janice Powell-Fitchett, the treatment team supervisor. We go to an open grassy field with concrete walkways. She points out the four small oblong buildings with metal grids over the windows where the girls live. They're termed "cottages" rather than cellblocks in order to lessen the psychological impact of incarceration on the kids who are sent here. That's also why Ventura's called a "school." The girls' cottages are Buenaventura, Alvarado, El Mirasol and Montecito. Each one has about 65 girls in it. The boys have their own cottages. There's limited interaction between the sexes, mostly just during classes or special programs. Ventura has high school and college level classes as well as job training.

6:30 AM Buenaventura is our first stop. Inside, it looks like a college dormitory living room. There are three rows of soft-cushioned lounge chairs with green and red seat covers. In front of them is a 24-inch TV locked in a wooden box with a Plexiglas cover. Suddenly there's a loud click, and I hear a woman's voice on the PA. "Good morning, ladies. It's 6:30. I will be unlocking now. Breakfast will be at 6:45."

6:45 AM We pass through a corridor into Alvarado, which is the spitting image of Buenaventura. I stand in the west-wing hallway, waiting to be introduced to the 17-year-old girl living behind door 11, Ebony Bluitt. Janice peeks through the rectangular glass pane of her door and asks, "Are you ready?" then pauses. "Oh, you're using the bathroom. We'll give you a minute." Janice turns her back to the door and smiles at me awkwardly. Two minutes later she looks in again and says, "Ready?" "Yeah," comes the answer, softly. Janice unlocks a standard key lock and a bolt lock, and opens the door for me.

Ebony is a darling little African-American girl from South Central Los Angeles, about five feet tall and 125 pounds, if that. She has a warm brown complexion and a small button nose. She sits on her bed, wearing a blue nightshirt. A couple of pink hair rollers flop on her forehead. She greets me with a congenial smile, rubbing the sleepiness from her eyes.

I step into the room over a welcome mat she's fashioned out of a white towel. Her whole place is about eight steps long. The first brings me to the sink, on the left side. Two more and I'm at the toilet. Another one and a half, and I reach the bed. I turn to the right, take one more step and there's Ebony's desk, crowded with books, pictures of her friends, and a small TV. I turn to the right again and take three more steps to the door, past the cubbyhole that holds her shoes, some knickknacks and a Koran. On the wall there's a picture of a light-skinned newborn baby. "Whose baby?" I ask. "Mine," she says as her entire face radiates. "She's six months old." I go outside to let her dress for breakfast in private. When she finally says in her squeaky voice, "You can come in," I find her wearing a long blue T-shirt, blue jeans folded up at the ankles and little untied brown boots. I ask if this is the required dress, and she responds, "Uh-huh. We're supposed to wear white sneakers, but I wear these sometimes in the morning." Nothing in her movements reveals any sign of badness. I find myself being warmed by her obvious youthfulness, and wonder what crime she could possibly have committed.

CHENIQUA, 21: ASSAULT WITH A DEADLY WEAPON

7:15 AM We're in the cafeteria that is shared by Buenaventura and Alvarado. It contains only about 10 folding tables and chairs, because the girls eat in shifts. The 20 girls from Ebony's wing grab yellow plastic trays and form a line in front for the eggs, bread, oatmeal and prunes. Ebony doesn't pick up a tray. She often skips breakfast. "It's always eggs and something," she says as she turns her face into a frown.

Ebony tells me that in January 1993 she was convicted of assault with a deadly weapon after she and about eight other girls beat up the woman in charge of the foster-care home she lived in. She was sentenced to three years and will not be eligible for parole until 1996 (with good behavior, she could be out in 1995). "I didn't do too much," she claims. "It was just that I was there and I left with them. I stole a van and drove off." To this day Ebony maintains that she didn't beat the woman up. Either she really didn't do it, or she's in total denial. Still, if she doesn't own up to the crime, it will take longer for her to be paroled.

Ebony has lived in foster care since she was six. "My mother uses drugs. She used to be on heroin, but I guess she likes cocaine better [now]. She switches back and forth," she says. "I was also being molested by a friend of my mother's. They told her in order to get me back she had to stay away from him. But she didn't want to."

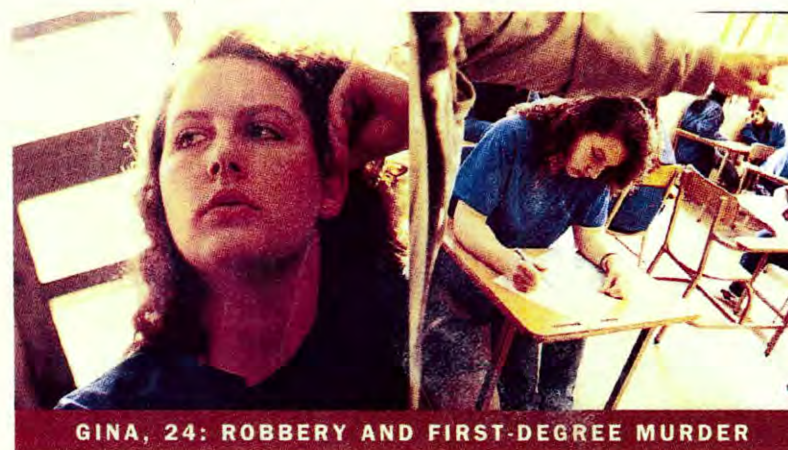
I ask about other family members. "My father is in prison. He's been in there since I was three months." Ebony's voice softens a bit, as if she doesn't want anyone but me to hear what she's saying. "Every time I ask why, I get a mixed story. I think it has something to do with killing people and drug smuggling."

EBONY, 17: ASSAULT WITH A DEADLY WEAPON

Last June, when she had her child, Fatima, her father's brother and wife took the baby in. They bring her up to the facility about once a month so Ebony can feel a part of the baby's life. "They go out of their way for me a lot," she says. "That's more than my mother's family has ever done.

"Sometimes I wish my life were different from what it is now. I could blame my mother. I could blame my father. I could blame myself. But why spend my time blaming people when I could just try and change it? That's why I've got to try my best and do good while I'm here. That's the only way I'm gonna get out."

I ask why she thinks she's at Ventura. "They said I had a ➤ *page 85*



GINA, 24: ROBBERY AND FIRST-DEGREE MURDER

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lot of anger locked inside about my life and abuse," she answers. Although her innocent eyes don't reveal that anger, I sense it. It was her first offense, but because the other girls who participated were sent here, she was too. "There's people here who will never see the streets again. The thought of being with them scares me. I'm used to them now but I hate it. I hate for somebody to tell me when I can talk, walk and run," she says. "Being cooped up in a small little room. I like my freedom."

8:45 AM The morning sun's rays are shining through the metal grids on the windows, adding much-needed light to the room. It's a good thing the school is in Cali, where the sun almost always shines; otherwise no one inside would know what light is. The whole cottage seems to be lit with 50-watt bulbs.

9:00 AM It's time for one of the "movements," when the kids are led from their living quarters to school and their jobs. They look like students out on a fire drill. There are about five racially diverse groups of 25 each, their ages ranging from 13 to 25. Many have gang-related tattoos. The unarmed guards (they carry Mace and handcuffs) chide them for talking. Before entering their classrooms, the kids must pass through a metal detector to be checked for any homemade weapons they might have.

9:25 AM I arrive at Gina Florio's second-period class. It's Alcohol and Drug Studies, and it's for those students who have serious substance-abuse histories. The 30-by-15-foot classroom has about 25 desks. There are a couple of posters about the harmful effects of drugs. Today's lesson is about "downer drugs," like sedatives. The teacher brings me over to Gina's desk. She's engrossed in the downer brochure, her curly brown hair dangling around her face. She looks up to greet me, then puts her head back down. Gina's 24. Before she leaves, we arrange to meet later. She warns me that she's a little mistrustful of the media. "I had a pretty high-profile case. They made me out to be a real evil, conniving person."

11:00 AM I'm thankful to get away for a lunch break. Though I am not an inmate, I'm already feeling my own liberties being unintentionally taken away. Every time I want to go into a room, I'm dependent on someone to unlock the doors for me. I'm not allowed to talk to any of the girls unless they've ➤ page 91

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handed in a permission sheet. And when I do sit down to interview them, it's frustrating because there's always some kind of noise or hollering or banging going on around us.

12:15 PM I'm back in Buenaventura cottage. Gina emerges from her room with a confident walk and smile. We pick two lounge chairs by the window. She turns to face me, places her arm on the back of the chair and rests her head against her hand. She tells me she's been in the Ventura school since she was 17.

Gina is from an upper-middle-class family in the San Francisco Bay area. Her parents divorced when she was 14. Her relationship with them wasn't good. "They were doing their own thing by the time I hit adolescence. So I didn't get the attention I required." She later says that her dad was a strict disciplinarian who used to hit her, but then downplays that by saying, "I got punishment when I had it coming."

By seventh grade, Gina was drinking, getting high and skipping school with older kids. "I tried this and that and thought it was cool. My friends became everything to me. They made me laugh. They made me feel good."

In February 1986, she and one of those friends lured a Japanese exchange student beneath an underpass, robbed her of the $2,000 she'd just withdrawn from the bank for car repairs and stabbed her to death. They wanted the money for drugs. Gina was sentenced to 25 years to life for robbery and first-degree murder.

When recounting the killing, Gina pauses between each word. She rolls her eyes up in her head to hold the tears back. Then she looks away from me. "I don't want to talk about this," she says. "Why?" I ask. Gina looks at me directly and says, "Because it's an awful thing. I killed someone."

Gina seems to have benefited from her time in lockup. Through the school's Free Venture Program, she earns a salary as a reservation agent for a major airline. She's also a student in the Culinary Arts Program. "I probably couldn't have said it two years ago, but I am at a point now where I am capable. I have self-esteem and a lot of really wonderful things going for me. And I absolutely belong at home." But when she turns 25, she has to transfer to the State Department of Corrections, where she'll do at least eight more years in an adult facility. "My future is so vague to me. I can't plan. I can't go, 'Well, I'd like to be a photographer or I'd like to do this or that,' because all that is so far off."

1:30 PM I am driven over to the girls' work site for Ventura's Fire Camp Program, which trains some of the kids to become fire fighters. Cheniqua Young, the last girl I am to interview, is a Swamper, which is what they call a crew leader in the program. Like the other girls, she's wearing dirty workmen's gloves, blue jeans, a khaki shirt, a red helmet and goggles. She has a warm smile, but she says she's leery about speaking to me, so we agree to talk later.

4:15 PM I rush back to the grounds just in time to catch Ebony's talent-show rehearsal. She and two of her friends are going to dance to "Rump Shaker" by Wreckx-N-Effect. Ebony sees me, gets up and gives me a hug like I am a sister. I feel good. I think maybe I've made her feel important. When it's Ebony's turn to perform, she walks onstage with her head hung low. She seems nervous. The song begins, and her booty moves from side to side. She looks so cute.

7:15 PM Everyone's had dinner, and I finally have an opportunity to sit down with Cheniqua, who's from Compton, CA. She's all cleaned up and looks younger than her 21 years. But when she greets me with her full, toothy smile, the implication is, "Don't expect me to tell you everything, because I won't." I believe it stems from her gang involvement, with their credo, Don't trust anyone who isn't a homie.

Cheniqua is literally counting down the days until her parole hearing in May. She'll probably be released. Cheniqua has been at Ventura for three years, serving a term for assault with a deadly weapon. She got into a fight with an acquaintance and later went back for revenge, driving the getaway car as a friend shot at the girl.

She's been involved with gangs since she was 13. "I had the type of attitude that I didn't care about nothing," Cheniqua says. "I thought [joining a gang] was the thing to do. All the young kids my age were in. I thought it was the life. My parents tried to talk to me, but it just went in one ear and out the other."

What's her opinion of locking kids up? "It should depend on how serious their crimes are. And they should have counselors who have been in our situation. A counselor who has never been in trouble doesn't understand. They think we're all bad." "Well aren't you?" I ask. "No," she answers emphatically.

When I ask about her future, Cheniqua's face brightens: "My dreams are to have my own place, drive a nice car and be married with kids. I've learned a lot being in Fire Camp, and I want to continue fighting fires once I'm out. I'd also like to go to college." Cheniqua laughs like she can't believe these things are coming out of her mouth. Frankly, I think it's admirable, given her history of drive-by's, robberies and drug dealing.

9:15 PM The girls have had several hours before lockdown to prepare for the next day's classes. Some take showers or make calls on the pay phones. In front of the TVs, they hang out in cliques. The white, black and Latino groups aren't mixing with each other much.

9:45 PM The lounge in Buenaventura clears when everyone is sent to their rooms to wait for their doors to be locked and their lights to be turned off from the outside.

10:00 PM All the girls in Alvarado have been locked down, but Ebony is allowed to stay in the lounge area so I can see her one last time. I'm told she was asking about me for hours. She smiles at me. Before they lock her up in her room, she gives me a big hug. I really feel maternal toward her. As she turns and walks away with the guard, I stop and call her name. "Ebony." She turns around in her long, flowing nightgown. "Do well in here, OK?" Her squeaky voice says "OK." "Don't just tell me 'OK,'" I emphasize. "Show me and keep in touch." She turns around, and her voice echoes, "I will."

10:30 PM On the way to my car, I am thankful that I only had to stay in the facility for 16 hours, because the stress from the day has worn me down. I'm saddened by these girls' stories and angry that it even has to be this way. Maybe all they needed was for someone to pay attention early on and make them think their lives were worth something. You shouldn't have to lock kids up to give them a sense of self-esteem. How come Ebony couldn't receive job training before she got into trouble? Why didn't someone teach Cheniqua to be a firefighter or Gina to be a chef? The time to intervene is before the crime happens, not after. ✘

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