

## **Personal Foul**

**By Keeonna Harris**

My son Tre was born on December 22, 1995. Eight months later, his father, Jason, was sentenced to 22 years in prison. We weren't able to show up for the trial. My son was just a baby and I couldn't even drive. Since both of Jason's parents were dead, it meant he was 17 years old, tried and convicted without any family present.

It's easier to erase someone's humanity when there's no family involved—easier to focus on being “tough on crime” and put someone in a bubble. To make it seem like they are floating in this world alone. Like there are no consequences for removing them from society. Like there are no consequences for wiping them off the face of the earth.

Jason got sentenced to 22 years in prison, but I don't think the prosecutor understood they were also sentencing my son and I to devastation and trauma, to a financial burden for the rest of our lives. It was devastating for me, but my son had no idea what was ahead of him.

When my son was two, he discovered a love of basketball. He could shoot from anywhere in the room on his Fisher Price basketball hoop. As he learned to talk, he learned all the facts and stats of every NBA player. He loved the Lakers, Kobe, Iverson, and everything about the game.

By the time he was six, he started playing on teams and you could already see his talent. The bigger he got, the better his jumper got. He was always in range, and he could really play. You could tell he was a natural on the court.

Prison is easier to visit when children are young. There's more to hold their attention. Card games. Puzzles. Some have designated play mats, geared towards playing with toddlers. But 22 years is a long time.

Things stop holding interest. Once your child is school age and entertained by simple things, the child becomes a pseudo-adult in the eyes of the state. Physical contact becomes possible passing of contraband. The child becomes a suspect.

Their innocence is gone, in the eyes of the state. No more physical displays of affection. No more play.

For the first 10 years Jason was in prisons far away from us. Visitation was more sporadic, since you had to plan an entire trip, take a plane, rent a car. Planning a whole vacation to some middle of nowhere prison town.

Compared to the far away travel, Jason getting moved to Calipatria State Penitentiary was like moving down the block. A three-hour drive was nothing. It started a rhythm of visitations every weekend. Finally, our little family got a big win. This was the closest we got to winning the lottery.

We had already lived through 10 years, so 10 more didn't seem so far away. We wanted to make the most of our time together. Visiting every weekend meant we were connected as a family. We got to know each other on a different level.

Now my 10-year-old boy could grow up, able to see and talk to his dad regularly, ask questions he might not be comfortable asking me. We could stay close until Jason came home.

Tre started playing travel ball when he was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He had been playing basketball since he was little; it brought such a huge smile to his face. I would do anything to support whatever brought that joy to him. And he was good.

But this meant practice four times a week, at a gym almost an hour away from our house. \$250 for the workouts. \$500 fees. This was when gas was \$5, \$6 a gallon, so between work and basketball this was about \$600 a month in gas.

This also meant we couldn't visit the prison every weekend. Phone calls became more common. Talking for 15 minutes a day meant \$150 a month in phone bills. But even these calls were in the evening, usually while Tre was at practice. After years of being far away, now Jason was a three-hour drive away, but everyone started to get further apart--there wasn't enough time in the day for everybody to do everything.

At first Tre was so excited about travel ball. He wanted me to show up to all the practices. After a few practices, I noticed that I'm the only woman there. Everyone in the stands is a dad. I started to notice more, because none of the other fathers talked to me, except the coach. They were polite, but there was no camaraderie, no hand slap-pin', no talk about our kids' stats, no carpools, no little comments and jokes. Staying through practice meant I was isolated, sitting alone. Tre noticed. He started to make comments.

Asking me to watch every practice turned into "you don't have to come every time." "You don't have to cheer so loud." "You don't got to call out defense." "You can just pick me up after."

A divide grew between us over the season. He started to lose confidence. And he started to play less and less. Something was missing, that I couldn't reach, and I couldn't give. His light was dimmed. His body language on the court wasn't the same. I'd tell him to keep his head up, not to be scared of nobody. "But I'm small." He was the best point guard on the team and not even the smallest one, but there was a part of him I couldn't reach.

The saying goes: don't do the crime if you can't do the time. But there's no thought of the time it would take from the rest of us. When Jason first got locked up, there was no consideration of the choices that my son and I would face. Nobody knew my son would be forced to choose between basketball and his father.

There were no conversations or hearings about what it would cost me. The cost to my finances being the sole income for the house, the only one paying for activities, the only one with the time to show up for both Jason and Tre.

Jason got sentenced to 22 years alone in a courtroom, but Tre and I got sentenced with him.