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*A gathering here lauded a national mentoring drive and looked ahead.*

## Rallying for inmates' children

By Kera Ritter

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Jamar Gipson wanted to be just like his father, a tough guy who went to prison before Gipson was born.

By the time he was 10, Gipson hung out on the street and fought. He was about to be initiated into a gang when his mother signed him up for the Amachi program through the local Big Brothers Big Sisters organization.

The program, which pairs children of incarcerated parents with mentors, originated in Philadelphia six years ago.

About 300 mentors and workers from across the country met in the city this week for a conference to celebrate the program's successes and plan for the future.

"If Charles hadn't come into my life," said Gipson, now 13, speaking about his mentor, Charles Pierson, 39, "I'd either be dead or in jail right now. I'm glad to have him by my side."

More than two million children nationwide have a parent in prison, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics.

About 20,000 of those children live in Philadelphia.

Research shows that children with incarcerated parents are at higher risk of having social or behavioral problems and often end up in prison themselves.

Former Philadelphia Mayor W. Wilson Goode Sr., now a minister and director of the Amachi program, has witnessed this cycle.

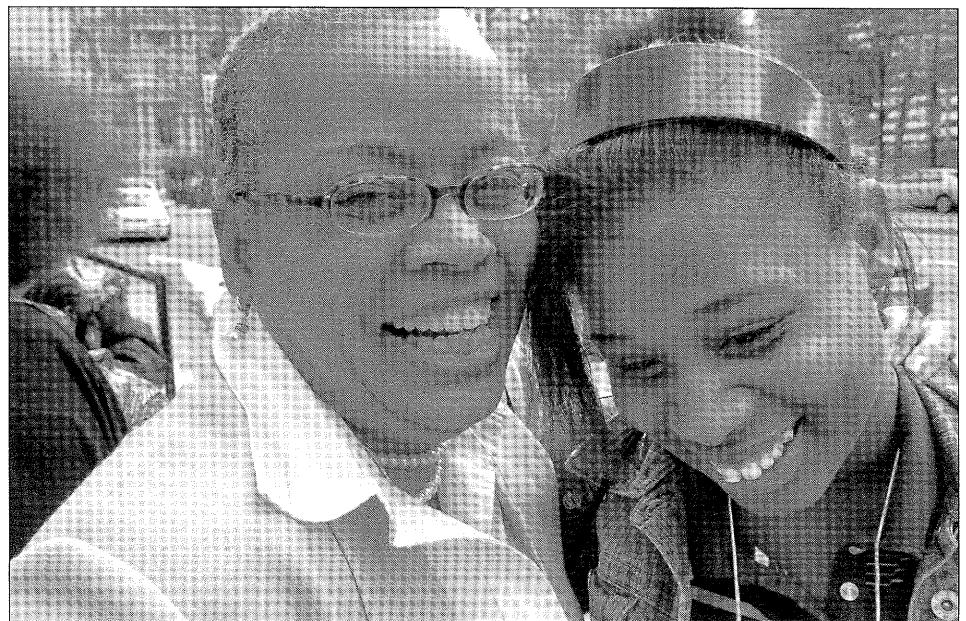
"I went to a prison and saw a grandfather, a father and a grandson, all in prison at the same time, and they told me they met for the first time in prison," Goode said. "I've seen mothers and daughters in the same cell. We have to break the cycle."

The Amachi program originated in the city in 2000. John DiIulio Jr., the



GERALD S. WILLIAMS / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**Marie Gilliam, 19, and mentor Ericka Dill** relate a funny moment at Arch Street United Methodist Church, 55 N. Broad St. About 300 mentors and workers met here this week for a conference to celebrate the Amachi program's successes and to plan for the future.



**Brenda Taylor** clearly enjoys the fellowship of offering guidance to Demetra. The two were also at the Methodist church.

first director of President Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, came up with the idea of matching children with mentors recruited by churches. Goode was asked to implement the program.

Recruiting began in November 2000. Big Brothers Big Sisters Southeastern Pennsylvania screened the volunteers and trained the mentors.

Each church was asked to provide 10 volunteers willing to commit to at least one hour a week for mentoring.

At first, Amachi had difficulty identifying children of inmates. Some agencies and organizations didn't reveal information about the families because they wanted to protect their privacy. Many service agencies had no idea whether a child's parents were incarcerated.

"There's no record of these children anywhere," Goode said. "So I went to the prisons to talk to the parents."

Over four months, Goode made five presentations. Parents completed enrollment forms for almost 2,000 children.

The first matches were made in April 2001. About 20,000 children nationwide are now being served in 232 locations.

Most programs are funded with federal money. Program administrators are lobbying for states to commit 1/2 of 1 percent of their corrections budgets to continue funding the programs.

Marie Gilliam was one of the children matched five years ago. Her mother, who is still in prison, signed her up. Gilliam said she considered her mentor, Ericka Dill, to be family.

"Ericka has been there for me," said Gilliam, now 19. "When people in my



**At Arch Street United Methodist Church**, Jamar, 13, smiles with mentor Charles Pierson, 39, as they reflect on how much they have both gained from their relationship over the years.

family passed away, she was there. When I turned 16, she got balloons for me and we celebrated, and no one had ever taken time for me like that. It's made me a better person to have her by my side."

Gilliam believes that without the Amachi program, she might have dropped out of high school and gotten pregnant. She is scheduled to graduate in June and is planning to attend college.

Gilliam's story is the kind of success

that Goode wants to see with all of the matches.

"They need not follow the footsteps of the parent who has gone to jail," Goode said.

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**ONLINE EXTRA**

To listen to interview excerpts from the conference, go to <http://go.philly.com/amachi>



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