

# Angel House

By Anne Cassidy

"They think of me as grandma," says Sandy Tucker of the bevy of babies in her care.



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Rachael Copp cuddled her one-month-old, Timothy, and caressed each tiny finger and toe. “I have this little song that I sing to him,” she said, gazing into his eyes. “I’m the only one who sings it to him.” Rachael could have been any new mother about to croon a lullaby to her newborn—except she was an inmate at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women, with only two hours a week to spend with her son. She was one of the lucky ones. Not only did she get paroled, but while she was in prison she did not have to put Timothy up for adoption or into foster care, as do so many incarcerated mothers. There was another place for Timothy to go—a bright, safe, happy place called Angel House, nestled in the rolling hills of rural Casey County, Kentucky. Angel House is home to more than a dozen babies whose mothers are in prison. In the last 11

years it has given over 400 babies regular bonding time with their moms and a safe place to gurgle, coo and grow. It has given their mothers something even more precious: hope. “It’s a reason to straighten out their lives, a light at the end of the tunnel,” says Angel House’s founder, Sandy Tucker, 58. She named the program Born Free Ministry

Right: Veronica Smith cherishes time spent with her baby, Kaydonna. Below: A toddler heads back to Angel House after visiting his mom.



Anne Cassidy is the author of “Parents Who Think Too Much.”

Photos: Mark Stephenson (bottom)

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because although the mothers are incarcerated, the babies are not. They have lives outside the prison walls. If she has anything to do with it, they will be good lives.

Taking care of kids is nothing new for Sandy. Growing up, she often baby-sat for her siblings. After she married, she and her husband, Jerry, adopted a little boy and had two biological daughters. Their love of children led the Tuckers to devote their lives to helping kids. Over the years they adopted 25 children, now almost all grown, moved from their native Michigan to the foothills of Appalachia, and took foster kids under their wing. Then one day, in 1991, Sandy got a call from a minister. “He said he was visiting an inmate at the federal prison in Lexington who was going to give birth, and would we take her baby?”

**S**he was interested but thought she’d need a license for long-term infant care in order to do it. “We found out there’s no way in Kentucky to get a license to care for babies long-term,” Sandy said. But she didn’t give up. “The state said that if we had custody they wouldn’t have to regulate us.” So she and Jerry agreed to assume temporary custody of the baby while the mother was incarcerated. This released the state from legal responsibility, and Sandy promised the mother she could reclaim parental rights when she was out of prison. Otherwise federal law requires states to sever parental rights if a child has spent 15 out of the past 22 months in foster care. The plan worked because the judge knew the Tuckers had a reputation for helping kids in need. As with all the children in her custody, Sandy accepts no state or federal funds, but supports the babies largely through donations. Once she made those first arrangements, Sandy says, “God opened up the windows of heaven and rained babies down on us.”

The babies stay at Angel House from several weeks to several years and visit their moms as often as possible (weekly for some, less for others). After age three, children move to the Galilean Children’s Home, a rambling complex that Sandy and Jerry had built next door to Angel House. It is currently home to 65 kids. “I’m grateful to Angel House. If it wasn’t for them, the state would take our babies,” says Veronica Smith, snuggling her infant, Kaydonna. Smith gave birth while serving a five-year sentence. She spent each week waiting for Thursdays, when she could hold Kaydonna in the prison chapel, which is set aside for the two-hour bonding sessions. (Smith is now out of prison and staying at a halfway house.)

For most of the week Kaydonna and the other babies lead typical baby lives. They eat, sleep and play at Angel House, a spacious, homey place fitted with a raised bathtub and shelves of baby bottles. On Mondays they are taken

to a nearby nursing home to visit honorary grandparents. The babies have nannies, Angel House staffers who become friends to the moms as well as loving stand-ins, rocking the babies, changing and feeding them, recording first words and photographing first steps. Many of these nannies are volunteers, and the biggest problem for them is not getting too attached. “You have to remember that the babies aren’t yours,” says staffer Debbie Baugh.

When babies arrive at the prison, both they and their caregivers are gently searched, as are the backpacks of diapers and bottles that travel with them. Then they are carried to the prison chapel, into their mothers’ waiting arms. The caregivers make sure the babies haven’t just eaten so their mothers can feed them. After that, the moms have two hours to memorize their little ones’ smiles and give them a taste of the mothering that awaits them.

As Sandy has found, incarcerated mothers and their children have a great need for help, yet programs like Angel House are scarce to nonexistent elsewhere in the country. From 1991 to 2001 the number of female prisoners nearly doubled, as did the number of children with mothers in prison, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. While the department estimates that there were 129,000 children with mothers in state and federal prisons in 2001, most experts believe that number is higher.

“I’ve had people say to me, ‘Why care about these mothers? Let them suffer,’” Sandy says. “But I say, ‘What crime did the child commit to be without a mom?’” Most of the mothers are in prison for nonviolent crimes associated with drug abuse, and they desperately want to make a home with their babies when they get out. “They’re not in prison for being bad parents,” Sandy adds.

She doesn’t consider herself an activist. Indeed, with her modest Mennonite-style dress she certainly doesn’t look like one. “I’m not looking for the spotlight,” Sandy says. But she does feel she’s where she belongs, helping children and, she hopes, helping their mothers too.

That’s certainly the case for Charlene Brown, whose children, 10, 9 and 5, are the oldest in the Born Free program. Normally, older children visit their mothers on family day, but Charlene hasn’t seen her kids in three months because she violated prison rules. Faced with such a void, Charlene was offered an incentive. If she took a course in anger management and other life skills, she would be allowed a special visit. She jumped at the chance. “Did you read the book I sent?” Charlene asks her nine-year-old during their long-awaited visit. It teaches the importance of taking responsibility for your actions, she explains as she hugs her boys and braids her daughter’s hair. She’s determined they won’t make the same mistakes she has.

When it’s time for a mother to be released, Sandy relinquishes custody so the mom can have her baby back immediately. “Some mothers go to a halfway house, so they can’t take their babies right away, or they need a chance to get an apartment or a job. But 99 percent want their babies at the gate,” Sandy says. Only 6 out of the approximately 400 mothers have not regained custody of their children, she adds. Sandy is wise enough to know that not all of these stories will have happy endings. But thanks to her, at least they can have happy beginnings.

**FC**