

# IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Miss Mississippi Extends Letter Writing Programs to Incarcerated Parents at Rankin County Prison**

JACKSON — Children whose parents are incarcerated at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility can write Miss Mississippi Asya Branch through her program called “Letters from Miss Mississippi.”

The parents also can participate in another program with Branch called “Love Letters,” which provides stationery and stamps to inmates in need so that they can continue their relationship with their children while incarcerated. The program started in the Lee County Jail in June 2017.

Branch extended the invitation for both programs while visiting CMCF on Saturday, Sept. 29. She mingled with parents and their children during Mom and Me, where more than 200 inmates enjoyed a special visitation with their children, before speaking to a select group of about 100 adults and youth.

Branch’s platform is empowering the children of incarcerated parents. She has taken her message to schools, civic organizations, and jails. CMCF will be the first prison for both programs, she said.

Branch, 20, of Booneville, said she chose her message because she realizes there are others like her with a family member in prison. Her father has been incarcerated since she was about 10 years old. Anthony Branch is serving 12 years for armed robbery and kidnapping in Prentiss County.

“I just want to be an example that, regardless of your circumstances, or what you’ve gone through, it doesn’t have to define you or your future,” she said drawing applause during an hour-long question-and-answer session at CMCF.

She told how her father’s incarceration greatly affected her, especially as a daddy’s girl, and her family. “It took a toll on our family,” she said. “But I have a very positive, optimistic mindset. I try to find the good in every situation.”

The University of Mississippi student said keeping a connection with her father, mostly through letters, has helped shape her into the person she is today. She last saw him several weeks ago.

“He is part of the reason I never gave up on any of my dreams,” she said. One of those dreams since the age of 6 was to become Miss Mississippi, she said.

Parents keeping a connection with their children while incarcerated is important, she said.

“Nobody is perfect,” she said. “Nobody. We all make mistakes and that is just a part of life. What you have to learn is grow from your mistakes and let them use you to shape you into the person that God has intended for you to be. Think about those mistakes and how they can strengthen you and push you toward a brighter future.”

Inmates said Branch was an inspiration, especially those who have daughters. Rosemary Egan, who was sentenced to prison in December on drug-related charges in Jackson County, told Branch she was glad to hear her.

“I really wasn’t sure about coming, and I am really happy that I did because I am constantly (worried about) my daughters and how they are going to turn out with me being gone,” Egan said to Branch during the question-and-answer session. “But you just gave me a little bit of hope that they will make it through OK... You gave me hope.”

Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall describes Branch as an “amazing person. She has an amazing platform.” She said the department will work with Branch to ensure that her letter writing programs are available to incarcerated parents.

Branch’s visit to the prison is another way for the department to promote reunification of the family, Commissioner Hall said. “We want parents under our supervision to keep that connection with their children so that when they get out, that connection will be there to help motivate them to not come back,” she said.

CMCF Superintendent Ron King said permission forms are being sent out to incarcerated parents. “We think this is something very positive,” Superintendent King said. “She was very encouraging to our staff as well.”