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As thousands of N.J. prisoners get out early, one father meets his son

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Early Wednesday morning, Lucas Muscle awoke in a New Brunswick motel.

In the first seven months of Lucas' life, the country has seen a once-in-a-century pandemic, a spike in opioid deaths, civil rights protests and one of the most contentious presidential campaigns in modern history.

Yet the uncertainty hanging over Lucas' family since April has been more specific: Would Lucas's father survive to meet his son?

New Jersey prisons recorded the highest coronavirus death rate in the country in May. The day after Election Day, the state began releasing thousands ahead of schedule due to a first-in-the-nation bill to let prisoners out who had less than a year left to serve.

If all went well, Lucas' father would be one.

Jennifer Muscle, 40, said she hadn't slept well since her husband was arrested late last year, around the time strange new symptoms were starting to be reported in Wuhan, China.

As the virus spread in New Jersey in the spring, Jennifer glued herself to Gov. Phil Murphy's daily press conferences, hoping to hear something about what was happening with in the prisons.

Three days after Lucas was born, as New Jersey became a hotspot for the virus, Murphy announced some inmates would be temporarily released to their homes. Her husband was not one of them.

Without her husband's income, Jennifer reached out to social services, who helped her and her young son move into a Red Carpet Inn.

But then, about a week ago, Jennifer had good news: Her husband was eligible for early release.

Richard Muscle Sr. was going to meet his son.

By 4 a.m. Wednesday morning, Jennifer was awake in the motel.

That was where they were picked up later Wednesday morning by Lucas' 17-year-old brother, Gabe Soltis.

Gabe's Mazda 6 had recently broken down. He'd gotten the fuel line fixed, only to have another part give out and a mechanic call in sick.

But the engine started Wednesday. The three took off, driving South, stopping to wait in a Shop Rite parking lot. Lucas slept in the backseat, and Jennifer burned through a Maverick Menthol. Inside the Mazda were two pairs of socks, Adidas sneakers, sweatpants — “welcome home” clothes for her husband.

Richard Muscle, 42, had worn down his left knee over the years while working on roofs. Pain pills led to heroin, he and his wife said, and he was later convicted of two drug and one theft charges, according to prison records. He's been clean since 2018, but a probation violation put him back behind bars, they said.

Richard ended up at Jones Farm, a minimum security work camp, where he bunked in close quarters with more than a dozen other men, he said. It's connected to the Central Reception and Assignment Facility in Trenton, where more than 200 staff and prisoners were reported infected and at least two inmates died with the virus since April.

Richard would call his wife often. Before he would talk to his son Lucas in the womb. Now his voice was filtered through an Android.

Some days, on those prison phone calls, Richard told his wife he was afraid he might die.

On Wednesday morning, when Richard called his wife, the news was good: He was hoping to be out before noon.

Gabe drove past changing leaves and barbed wire to the assignment facility.

The sprawling brick prison is only a few miles from the Statehouse, where lawmakers voted to release prisoners early, and just across the river from Pennsylvania, where officials were counting votes for president.

Lack of sleep and sheer anticipation of a reunion made her feel charged up, she said, like she would give off an electric shock if anyone touched her.

On the prison grounds, she stepped outside near a cluster of corrections officers. She spelled her husband's name.

The officer, mask pulled below his chin, leafed through papers. Richard's name wasn't there.

“Not on this list, not leaving the building,” he said.

Jennifer lifted her hands in the air, then let them drop to her side.

“Ah, ah,” the officer said, tapping his packet. He looked up. “They don’t have it alphabetically.”

Her husband would get out at 2:30 p.m., he said.

The family returned to the Shop Rite parking lot, then moved to a park, before circling back to the prison right on time.

An hour passed.

The three first idled in a line of cars, then pulled into a gravel lot with dozens of others waiting to pick up loved ones.

Another hour.

Lucas may have been the best dressed person around, sporting slacks and suspenders over a shirt that read, “Tough Like Daddy.”

Suddenly, a trio of officers appeared, calling names on clipboards.

Gabe drove his mother and brother around the corner. Jennifer pointed to her husband.

Nobody was allowed out of the car. Richard jumped inside, kissed Gabe’s cheek, grabbed Jennifer’s hand and took his first look at Lucas.

“Hey little buddy,” Richard said.

Outside the prison gates, the four parked, embraced and kissed. Richard took Lucas in his arms.

Richard had been able to see short videos of his kids while incarcerated, and he ran his fingers through Lucas' hair. “Bald spot’s a little bigger,” Richard said. Lucas sat calmly, grabbing his father’s finger.

Richard mussed Gabe’s hair.

“Damn you got tall,” Richard said.

The family discussed where to go first. While in prison, Richard said he’d seen a lot of Wendy’s commercials. Gabe offered to buy.

Jennifer buckled Lucas' car seat back into the Mazda.

“You are going to do so many diapers,” she said to her husband. “That’s all you.”

Talk turned to the future. Richard said he hoped his job would be waiting for him. Jennifer said she hoped they'd be able to move into an apartment.

Back in his mother's arms, Lucas drifted off to sleep.