

Born in a US prison cell: the extraordinary tale of the black liberation orphan

Sunday 26 August 2018, by [PILKINGTON Ed](#) (Date first published: 31 July 2018).

Mike Africa Jr has spent 40 years of his life with both parents behind bars. Then one day in June, his life changed. Ed Pilkington tells his story

The placenta was the trickiest part. How to dispose of it without it making a mess that would alert the guards that a child had just been born in a prison cell?

There was no medical equipment, no painkillers, no sterilized wipes or hygienic materials of any sort. When it came to cutting the umbilical cord in the absence of scissors, well, that was the easy part: just use your teeth.

But Debbie Sims Africa was more stressed about the placenta. It was 1978, she was 22 years old and five weeks into what would turn out to be a 40-year prison sentence.

She was determined to give birth on her own without any involvement of the jail officers so she could spend some precious time with the baby. In the end, a co-defendant helped her out, scooping up the placenta in her hands and secreting it to the shower room where she flushed it down the prison toilet.

The plan worked. Debbie Africa got to spend three wonderful days with her baby son. She hid him under a sheet and when he cried, other jailed women would stand outside the cell and sing or cough to obscure the noise.

She knew it couldn't last, as jail rules prohibited mothers being with their children. At the end of the three days she informed the jailers of the baby's existence and, once they had got over their astonishment, they arranged for the mother and son to be separated and for the child to be taken to the outside world.

So begins the extraordinary life of Mike Africa Jr, a man born in a prison cell, and his incarcerated parents. As he approaches his 40th birthday in September, he reflects on what a crazy ride it's been.



Mike Davis Africa Jr. Photograph: Ed Pilkington for the Guardian

He was born to a mother accused and later convicted of third-degree murder in one of the most dramatic confrontations with law enforcement of the 1970s black liberation struggle. Not only was Debbie Africa sentenced to 30 years to life for the death of a police officer, so too was her husband, Mike Africa Sr, father to Mike Jr, who was caught up in the same confrontation and given the same punishment.

Which makes Mike Jr a penal orphan of the black power movement. For almost 40 years, he visited both his parents in separate penitentiaries but never saw either of them outside prison walls. Last month [Debbie was finally released from prison on parole](#), but his father remains in captivity and to this day he has never seen the two of them together.

Debbie and Mike Sr, both now 62, are two of the Move Nine, the group of black radicals who were collectively held responsible for the death of Officer James Ramp during a [massive police shoot-out](#) at their communal home in Powelton Village, Philadelphia on 8 August 1978. The group, whose members take “Africa” as their last name as a political badge, were resisting eviction.

They were like the Black Panthers crossed with nature-loving hippies. Black power meets flower power

Move was one of the more extraordinary elements of the 1970s black liberation struggle. Deeply committed to fighting police brutality in African American communities, they were also devoted to caring for animals and the environment.

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They lived in a communal house along with dozens of stray dogs and cats where they would preach their political beliefs day and night at high volume through bullhorns, driving their neighbors to despair. Over time they came to be seen as dangerous non-conformists by the Philadelphia police and city government, leading to a drawn-out confrontation that culminated in the 1978 siege and gunfight involving hundreds of police that saw the death of Officer Ramp and sent nine of the black radicals to prison, potentially for life.

The Move Nine were accused of firing the first shot and of killing Ramp. Yet they have always claimed innocence. They deny that they shot at anybody and blame the officer’s death on accidental “friendly fire” from other armed police.

Ramp, 52, was a former marine who had served with the Philadelphia police department for 23

years. He was killed by a single bullet. Yet all nine Move members were convicted of his murder.



Move members in front of their house in the Powelton Village section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photograph: Leif Skoogfors/Corbis via Getty Images

I met Debbie Africa and her son as part of research into incarcerated black radicals that began more than two years ago. The starting point was the [Angola Three](#), former Black Panthers who had endured unprecedented stretches in solitary confinement in Louisiana's notorious Angola prison.

That began a journey that would bring me to interview several members of the Move Nine as well as former Black Panthers and members of the Black Liberation Army who remain incarcerated in some cases half a century after their arrests. It would culminate with a day spent with Debbie and Mike Jr, mother and son, as they celebrated their first time together beyond prison walls.

Debbie Africa was eight months pregnant during the 1978 siege. During the shoot-out she was holed out in the basement of the Move house, where she was bombarded by water cannons and tear gas and had to fumble her way out in the dark carrying her first child, her two-year-old daughter Michelle.

No evidence was presented at trial that she pulled the trigger or ever touched a gun. But she was convicted nonetheless as a murderer and conspirator.

Mike Sr remains behind bars in Graterford correctional institution in Pennsylvania. But last June, Debbie Africa became one of very few black liberationists convicted of violent acts from the 1970s to be [released on parole](#) having convinced the board she was no threat to society.

Debbie and Mike Jr talked to me at his home in a small town outside Philadelphia just two weeks after she had been released on parole from Cambridge Springs prison. They were both still clearly awestruck to be in each other's company after so long – Mike's sporadic prison visits to both his parents were nothing like this.

It's the little things that have dumbfounded Mike Jr most. The first morning after they got back to his house, they were sitting at breakfast wearing no shoes.

"It was the first time I've ever seen her feet, and it was the first time she'd ever seen my feet since I was three days old in her cell," he said.



Debbie Africa and her son, Mike Africa, in Clifton Heights, Pennsylvania. Photograph: Mark Makela for the Guardian

Debbie Africa described waves of overpowering emotion. “I can’t believe this is happening,” she said. “I’ll just start hugging him in the supermarket and people will be giving us strange looks.”

She talked about the wrench of letting her son go when he was three days old. “It was a hard, hard decision. I wanted what was best for him and I knew that was not to get close to me at any level. So I had to break the bond.”

Mike Jr was raised during his childhood by his grandmother and by a succession of different female members of the Move organization as part of its communal ethic. “I was a community kid, I had many mothers,” Mike Jr said in a deadpan voice, as though describing the weather.

Every Mother’s Day he makes the rounds of his “mothers”. He drives around bearing cards and flowers which he drops off at the homes of at least six women. He rattled off their names: Bert, Sue, Romana, Pam, Mary, Teresa.

Now he’ll be able to put flowers in the hands of his true birth mother. He had no idea who she was, nor who his father was, until he was about six or seven when their relationship to him was made clear to him.

“I didn’t know she was in prison, I didn’t know any of it. I thought that the person caring for me was my mother.”

He looks back on his childhood and recognizes that some aspects of his upbringing were less than ideal. “Who teaches a kid how to brush his teeth or take a bath but his parents. I didn’t know how to wash my hair ’til I was 15.”

Through his childhood he was taken to visit both parents in separate prisons, maybe once or twice a year. But for years he had no idea why they were locked up. When friends at school asked about him about them, he would demur or make up stories because he was embarrassed to reveal his ignorance.

I feel relief. Big relief. I never knew she would come out alive

Mike Africa Jr

It was only when he was 14 and sitting with his father in Graterford that the penny dropped. He asked Mike Sr whether there was anybody held in the prison who had done something really bad, like killing somebody.

"Yeah," Mike Sr replied, "me".

"He didn't go on to explain," Mike Jr recalled. "I was frightened. Was he going to be in here forever? I was crying my eyes out trying to figure it out, but I couldn't explain to him why I was crying. I couldn't put it into words."

Mike Jr said it took him years to put the pieces together. "I was left to figure it out for myself, to fend for myself."

But neither son nor mother are ones to dwell on the wounds of the past. I asked Debbie Africa whether she regretted that by her actions as a black liberationist and Move member she had put her son through so much pain.

"There are always going to be things in my life that I wish didn't happen," she said. "I do truly wish that what happened to my son hadn't happened, I do truly. But I look at the man he is now, and I love it."



Father and son, Mike Davis Africa Sr and Jr, in Huntingdon state correctional institution in 1993. Mike was 14. Photograph: Courtesy of Mike Davis Africa Jr

Having spent two days in the company of Mike Africa Jr outside Philadelphia, I can see what she means. He has turned out remarkably poised for someone with his chaotic childhood résumé.

He runs his own small business as a landscape gardener, is married and has four children of his own. He is a proud member of Move, has never owned or even held a gun, and his house is comfortable and full of light, though it was notable how much neater it was the second time I visited following Debbie's release. At last she has begun fulfilling that ritual of parents everywhere: tidying up after their child's mess.

On Mike Jr's part he's similarly delighted his mother has turned out as well-balanced, sociable and positive as she is, given 40 years in correctional institutions. "I feel relief. Big relief. I never knew she would come out alive. When people come out of prison they can be sick in the head, but this transition of her coming to my house has been the smoothest major transformation of my life."

Now the challenge is to help Mike Africa Sr secure parole, and so complete the family. His next appearance before the parole board is in September, and they are all already on tenterhooks.

A paradox of Debbie Africa's release is that under her parole terms she is not able to communicate in any form with her husband because he is classified as a co-defendant and thus is out of bounds. The last time they saw each other in the flesh was in 1986. Since then they had been allowed to write to each other from their cells, and in that way managed to keep their bond alive.

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Debbie Sims Africa

Now that the letter-writing has been stopped all they have in terms of connection is Mike Jr acting as a go-between. He lets each parent know how the other is doing. He also acted as my go-between, putting questions to his father which Mike Sr answered in a phone call to him.

How confident is Mike Sr, I asked, as he heads into the parole hearing?

"I'm confident that I'm going to tell the truth. I'm confident that I deserve parole. I'm confident I would never be considered a danger to the community ever again. We never intended for anyone to get hurt, and regret that anyone did get hurt."

Then he added: "What I'm not confident about is what they're going to do, I have no control over that."

He said the knowledge that his wife was now at home with his son and daughter was a great comfort to him. But it also heightened his desire to be with them all.

"Forty years of wanting, anticipating. It's like Double Dutch. You're always on the edge of that jump rope, hopping up and down, waiting to get in, waiting for your turn."

Ed Pilkington

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