

The **SECOND LOOK BOOK**

*A Collection of Stories From People Who Were Sentenced
as Kids to Adult Prison in Texas*



Presented by:

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, Epicenter, and the Lone Star Justice Alliance

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AN INTRODUCTION TO SECOND LOOK AT THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE

Imagine being in high school and suddenly finding yourself sentenced to an adult prison for the next 40 years. While your friends and classmates go on to college or to a job, while they are having families and buying a home, you are sitting in a prison cell for a mistake you made as a kid.

In Texas, kids under the age of 18 who commit certain crimes are routinely sentenced to a life term in an adult prison, with no opportunity for parole for 40 years.

However, **tremendous growth and maturity often occur in a person's late teens through mid-20's.** Research has shown that certain areas of the brain, particularly those that affect judgment and decision-making, do not fully develop until the early 20's.¹ The U.S. Supreme Court has acknowledged youths' ongoing development, stating in its 2005 *Roper v. Simmons* decision, "[t]he reality that juveniles still struggle to define their identity means it is less supportable to conclude that even a heinous crime committed by a juvenile is evidence of irretrievably depraved character."²

The fact that young adults are still developing means they are uniquely situated for personal growth and rehabilitation. In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court held unconstitutional mandatory life without parole sentences for people under the age of 18, and required courts to consider the youthfulness of defendants facing that sentence.³ This decision, coupled with the *Roper* decision, recognizes that **it is wrong to deny someone who commits a crime under the age of 18 the opportunity to demonstrate rehabilitation. However, Texas sentencing laws ignore recent scientific evidence on adolescent development and neuroscience,** and the state's current parole system provides no viable mechanism for reviewing a case after a young person has grown up and matured.

This is a very costly approach, both in terms of human capital and taxpayer dollars. It costs approximately \$2.5 million to incarcerate a person for life, whereas it costs taxpayers approximately \$625,720 to incarcerate a person for 20 years.⁴ **Texas law should motivate young people to focus on rehabilitation, and it should provide a path to redemption for those who can prove they merit a second chance.** Early release for individuals who have demonstrated that they have sufficiently matured and rehabilitated can save the state approximately \$1,874,280 per person.⁵

Texas should consider joining with other states that have provided a "second look" at the sentences of individuals who were convicted for crimes committed prior to their 18th birthday. Texas could provide an early parole hearing focused on the extent to which the person has demonstrated that he or she has successfully rehabilitated and matured. Such an early parole consideration will not only save taxpayer dollars, it will do so without compromising public safety.

This book contains letters from the very people who would be impacted under such a policy change. **Read their stories and decide for yourself — do they deserve a second look?**

Lindsey Linder
Policy Attorney, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition

¹See generally, S. Johnson, R. Blum, and J. Giedd, *Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Health Policy*, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 45(3), (Sept. 2009).

²*Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. 551, 570 (2005).

³*Miller v. Alabama*, 132 S.Ct. (2012).

⁴ACLU, *At America's Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly*, June 2012, https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/elderlyprisonreport_20120613_1.pdf. Calculation = ((Average cost per year per inmate to incarcerate before age 50 x 34) + (National estimate for annual cost for the care of an inmate after age 50 x 21)).

⁵*Ibid.* Calculation = (Average cost per year per inmate to incarcerate before age 50 x 20).

JUVENILE LIFERS AND THE COURT

Montgomery v. Louisiana (2016)¹ represents the latest in a line of recent Supreme Court cases applying the lessons of modern medical and psychological research to the constitutionality of sentences for crimes committed by juveniles.² In *Roper v. Simmons* (2005)³ the Court declared a “categorical” bar on imposition of the death penalty for any offense committed before the age of 18. In *Graham v. Florida* (2010)⁴ the Court articulated a similar categorical ban on life-without-parole sentences for non-homicide offenses. As the Court later summarized in *Miller v. Alabama* (2012):

In *Roper*, we cited studies showing that ‘[o]nly a relatively small proportion of adolescents’ who engage in illegal activity ‘develop entrenched patterns of problem behavior.’ And in *Graham*, we noted that ‘developments in psychology and brain science continue to show fundamental differences between juvenile and adult minds’ – for example, in ‘parts of the brain involved in behavior control.’ We reasoned that those findings – of transient rashness, proclivity for risk, and inability to assess consequences – both lessened a child’s ‘moral culpability’ and enhanced the prospect that, as the years go by and neurological development occurs, his ‘deficiencies will be reformed.’⁵

“Like other substantive rules, *Miller* is retroactive because it ‘necessarily carr[ies] a significant risk that a defendant’—here, the vast majority of juvenile offenders—‘faces a punishment that the law cannot impose upon him.’”⁶

The decisions in *Miller*, *Roper*, and *Graham* “rested not only on common sense – ‘what any parent knows’” – but on the ever-growing body of scientific research.⁷ First, this research confirms that juveniles are less capable of mature judgment than adults, and as a result are more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Studies have shown that juveniles scored significantly lower than adults on measures of “temperance” and “suppression of aggression,”⁸ and also that impulsivity declines from ages 10 to 30.⁹ Juveniles simply have less life experience to draw upon when evaluating potential negative consequences of their actions,¹⁰ and their ability to envision and plan for the future is still developing during this period.¹¹

Second, research confirms that juveniles are more vulnerable than adults to negative external influences and outside pressures, including their family, surroundings, and peers. Because of their legal minority, juveniles lack the freedom to remove themselves from certain negative influences.¹² Studies have accordingly shown that family and neighborhood conditions are major risk factors for juvenile crime, including homicide.¹³ Further, juveniles are especially vulnerable, when compared to adults, to the negative influence of peer pressure. Even without direct peer pressure or coercion, juveniles’ desire for peer approval and consequent fear of rejection affect their choices – and “the increased salience of peers in adolescence likely makes approval-seeking especially important in group situations.”¹⁴

Third, research has confirmed that juveniles have a greater capacity for change and reform than adults. Not only do personality traits change significantly during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, but the process of identity-formation typically remains incomplete until at least the early twenties.¹⁵ Empirical studies have shown that “the vast majority of adolescents who engage in criminal or delinquent behavior desist from crime as they mature.”¹⁶

Like mandatory life-without-parole schemes, Texas imposes mandatory life on any juvenile convicted

of capital murder. In Texas, “capital life” for a juvenile means no parole eligibility or consideration of good conduct time until the juvenile serves 40 calendar years.¹⁷ In Texas, the Parole Board has *sole discretion* to grant parole after the applicant becomes eligible.¹⁸ Even if granted parole at his or her first eligible date, a juvenile with this sentence will be at least 54 years old, well beyond the typical age to bear children, begin college, or otherwise contribute meaningfully to society. The United States Sentencing Commission recognizes that a sentence of 470 months, or 39.17 years, is effectively a “life sentence.”¹⁹

“In Texas, the overall parole grant rate is approximately 36 percent.”²⁰ “By contrast, the parole grant rate for individuals serving sentences of capital murder (which includes murder in the commission of certain other felonies and murder where the victim is a peace officer) has historically been low—around 8 percent on average over the last 15 years.”²¹ The parole grant rate for juveniles sentenced to capital murder is even lower: “Of the 366 Texas juveniles sentenced to life with the possibility of parole for capital murder since 1962, only 17 — less than 5 percent — have ever been released.”²²

Texas recently expanded the maximum time between reviews for individuals serving a life sentence for a capital felony or who were convicted of an aggravated sexual assault from five years to 10.²³ Thus, parole boards can “set off” (i.e., defer the review for) prisoners convicted of certain felonies for reconsideration up to 10 years. This new statute was intended to, and will likely have the consequence of, further assuring that juveniles sentenced to life will receive fewer opportunities for parole consideration. By further reducing the opportunities for release, Texas will likely see even lower rates of parole granted to juveniles sentenced to life.

The fact that a juvenile’s sentence is “life” rather than “life without parole” is not a basis for distinguishing *Miller*. While the juvenile will be *eligible* for parole after 40 calendar years, the remote possibility of parole is not sufficient to cure the constitutional infirmities of a system in which 95% of the juveniles given those sentences will die in prison. Without a meaningful way to distinguish *Miller*, all that is left is labels and semantics. The Supreme Court sets forth basic principles of constitutional law, and their decisions cannot be evaded by wordplay or by focusing on meaningless distinctions. The categorical rule articulated in *Miller* is about outcomes, not labels. Yet the outcome prohibited in *Miller* is exactly the one that will result if these sentences stand.

For this reason, the Lone Star Justice Alliance and our pro bono partners have begun to strategically challenge life and life without parole sentences given to juveniles. For more information about these litigation efforts, please visit www.lonestarjusticealliance.org or <https://www.facebook.com/LoneStarJusticeAlliance>.

Elizabeth Henneke, J.D.

Executive Director, Lone Star Justice Alliance

¹36 S. Ct. 718, 734, 193 L. Ed. 2d 599 (2016), as revised (Jan. 27, 2016) (hereafter *Montgomery*).

²In *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 577 US __ (2016), the court held that *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 US __ (2012) should be applied retroactively.

³543 U.S. 551 (2005) (hereafter *Roper*).

⁴560 U.S. 48 (2010) (hereafter *Graham*).

⁵*Miller v. Alabama*, __ U.S. __, 132 S.Ct. 2455, 2464-65 (2012); *Montgomery*, 136 S. Ct. at 734

⁶See also *Ex parte Maxwell*, 424 S.W.3d 66, 69 (Tex. Crim. App. 2014) (finding *Miller* retroactive).

⁷*Miller*, 132 S.Ct. at 2463-64.

⁸Elizabeth Cauffman & Laurence Steinberg, *(Im)maturity of Judgment in Adolescence*, 18 *Behav. Sci. & L.* 741, 748-49, 754 & tbl. 4 (2000).

⁹Laurence Steinberg et al., *Age Differences in Sensation Seeking and Impulsivity as Indexed by Behavior and Self-Report*, 44 *Developmental Psychol.* 1764, 1774-76 (2008).

¹⁰Franklin Zimring, *Penal Proportionality for the Young Offender*, in *Youth on Trial* 271, 280, 282 (Thomas Grisso & Robert Schwartz eds., 2000).

¹¹See Jari-Erik Nurmi, *How Adolescents See Their Future? A Review of the Development of Future Orientation and Planning*, 11 *Developmental Rev.* 1, 28-29 (1991).

¹²Alan Kazdin, *Adolescent Development, Mental Disorders, and Decision Making of Delinquent Youths*, in *Youth on Trial*; see also *Miller*, 132 S.Ct. at 2468.

¹³Kazdin, *Adolescent Development, Mental Disorders, and Decision Making of Delinquent Youths*, in *Youth on Trial*; see Rolf Loeber and David Farrington, *Young Homicide Offenders and Victims: Risk Factors, Predictions, and Prevention from Childhood* 61 & tbl. 4.1 (2011); Jeffrey Fagan, *Contexts of Choice by Adolescents in Criminal Events*, in *Youth on Trial*.

¹⁴Elizabeth Scott and Laurence Steinberg, *Rethinking Juvenile Justice* 39 (2009). These empirical conclusions have been confirmed by brain imaging studies showing that the mere awareness that peers were watching encouraged risky behavior among juveniles but not adults. Jason Chein et al., *Peers Increase Adolescent Risk Taking By Enhancing Activity in the Brain's Reward Circuitry* 14 *Developmental Sci.* F1, F7 (2011).

¹⁵E.g., Alan Waterman, *Identity Development from Adolescence to Adulthood* 18 *Developmental Psychol.* 341, 355 (1982); Laurence Steinberg and Robert Schwartz, *Developmental Psychology Goes to Court*, in *Youth on Trial*, *supra*, at 9, 27; Scott and Steinberg, *supra*, at 52.

¹⁶Elizabeth Scott and Laurence Steinberg, *Less Guilty by Reason of Adolescence: Developmental Immaturity, Diminished Responsibility, and the Juvenile Death Penalty*, 58 *Am. Psychologist* 1009, 1014-1015 (2003); see also Terrie Moffitt, *Adolescent-Limited and Life-Course-Persistence Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental Taxonomy*, 100 *Psychol. Rev.* 674, 685-686 (1993); Kathryn Monahan et al., *Trajectories of Antisocial Behavior and Psychosocial Maturity from Adolescence to Young Adulthood*, 45 *Developmental Psychol.* 1654 (2009). These psychological and sociological findings are supported by physiology. Over the last 10 years there has been a strong consensus among developmental neuroscientists that significant changes in brain structure and function occur during adolescence, evidencing that the adolescent brain is not yet fully developed in critical respects. Laurence Steinberg, *Should the Science of Adolescent Brain Development Inform Public Policy?* 64 *Am. Psychologist* 739, 742 (2009).

¹⁷Tex. Gov. Code § 508.145(b) (2014).

¹⁸37 Admin. Code § 145.2(a) (2014).

¹⁹See U.S. Sentencing Commission Preliminary Quarterly Data Report (through September 30, 2016), App. A7 (“In cases where the court imposes a sentence of life imprisonment, a numeric value is necessary to include these cases in any sentence length analysis. Accordingly, life sentences are reported as 470 months, a length consistent with the average life expectancy of federal criminal offenders given the average age of federal offenders.”); ¹⁹see also Robert Draper, “The Great Texas Prison Mess,” *Texas Monthly* (May 1996) (finding that some prisons in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice system have life expectancies as low as 20 years and as high as 70). Available at <http://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/the-great-texas-prison-mess/>.

²⁰American Civil Liberties Union, “False Hope: How Parole Systems Faith Youth Serving Extreme Sentences,” 47 (2016) (hereinafter “False Hope”) (citing University of Minnesota, Robina Institute, *By the Numbers: Parole Release and Revocation Across 50 States* (2016) (hereinafter, “By the Numbers”)). Available at available at https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/121416-aclu-parolereportonlineingle.pdf.

²¹*Id.* (“And the parole grant rate for individuals serving sentences of first-degree murder has historically been low—ranging from a 1.6 percent approval rate (two individuals) in FY 2001 to 14.9 percent (15 individuals) in FY 2014.” *Id.* (citing TDCJ Response to Tammy Martinez open records request (2015) (on file with the ACLU)).

²²Meagan Flynn, “Sorry for Life?: Ashley Ervin Didn’t Kill Anyone, But She Drove Home the Boys Who Did,” *Houston Press* (Jan. 12, 2016). Available at <http://www.houstonpress.com/news/sorry-for-life-ashley-erwin-didn-t-kill-anyone-but-she-drove-home-the-boys-who-did-8064300>.

²³Tex. Gov’t Code Ann. § 508.141 (West).

A COLLECTION OF STORIES

"A Season"
From the moment my brother
I knew I was alone in this world
My life as a child was not
I had a need of love and
I lacked so much.
I became emotional and
my family. I was
happy and alive. I
I. My brother
man, about 10
of being born
now to see
my only friend
She only
said, "mi
to be

Jermaine Hicks

Life sentence at 15 years old

“Even though I was not the killer in this crime, I was convicted and given a life sentence. The accused killer received less time and twenty years later went home on parole.”

A SECOND CHANCE

By JERMAINE HICKS

PRISON, CRIME and punishment are NECESSARY in a civilized society, but so is rehabilitation. This gives a person a chance to acknowledge their mistakes, and an opportunity to fix the problem that always affects others. In my situation, the only problem that needs to be fixed is me. We as humans are destined to make mistakes. As children, we have all fallen victim to our mistakes. We have all been accused of doing wrong, and finally, in God's eyes, we are all sinners. In his eyes also, we receive redemption through his love and grace. This exists for us all. So too, our society and laws should offer redemption for those who have discovered resilience and rehabilitation out of their moment of making a mistake.

Here in prison, where I compose these very thoughts, it can be hard for those of you to acknowledge my redemption. You can't read my mind, feel my heart or see my daily walk, but somewhere in this demonstration, I hope you find my seriousness towards my atonement.

In 1994, I was charged with capital murder. Even though I was not the killer in this crime, I was convicted and given a life sentence. The accused killer received less time and twenty years later went home on parole. I arrived at prison at age 17, 165 pounds, in handcuffs in 1996, uneducated, gang related, no family support and very lost. My father was sent to prison as well as all my brothers except one. I have always been a part of this system, born into foster homes, juvenile centers, placements, then to a state prison for

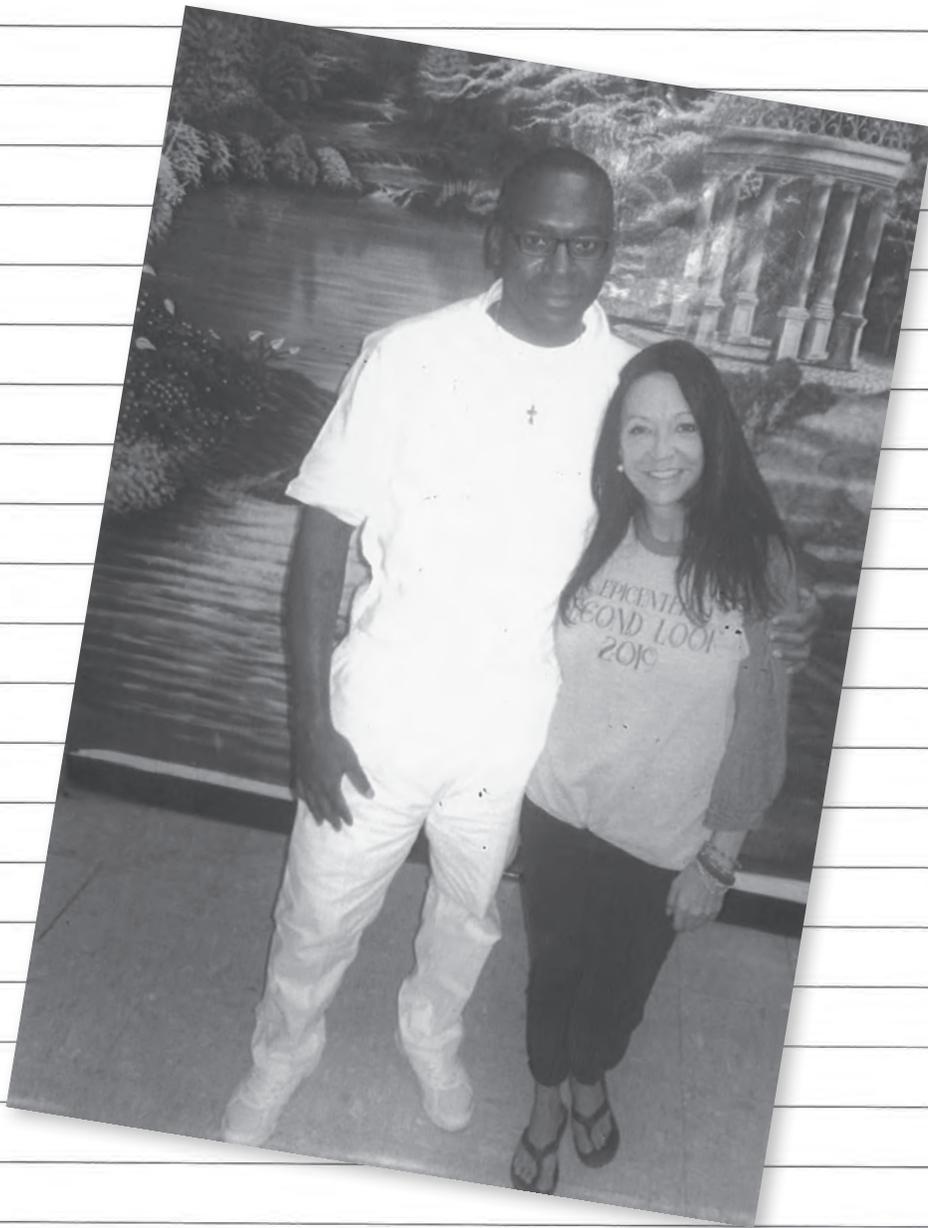
away from home. If there is a case for "School to Prison Pipeline," I'm it.

My first ten years in prison were harsh. From 15 years old to 26, I received no visits from family and very few letters. I was better, but I still had the gang life which showed me an unnatural sense of love. I acted out due to carelessness and frustration. I believed that my life was meant to be this way. Gangs, guns, drugs and prison cells. No family to care for me, no motivational role models to enlighten my path through this struggle. All I had was me. I had to make a decision. I had to give myself a chance or be a fool for the rest of my life in a world of sadness. I pulled myself up by first forgiving my circumstances and by making better decisions, because as an adult you must own those decisions, good or bad.

Teaching myself how to read and write, I learned about my struggles as a Black man living in America. I cried when I found out the truth about our path. In 2004, I renounced my affiliation as a gang member. I felt sick to know how those actions of "Banging" affected so many years of progress for a group of people who fought, cried, died, struggled and prayed to every God known in the universe to gain equality in a world where it should be a birth right. I owe them every respect, my very breath for the price of freedom.

This is how my change began. I realized that I was not guilty of murder but so much more. I found that God will put you in a situation in your life to humble you and allow you to realize the bigger

Picture, the picture that illustrates a better you, as well as showing you a life that you are allowing to pass you by. In those moments, I discovered a purpose and a vision that goes far beyond what I am capable of doing alone. I discovered a gift and a jewel of purpose that went outside my prison cell.



Megan Adams

99 year sentence at 15 years old

“Children, regardless of circumstance are still kids. Vulnerable and in need of nurturing. Prison does not solve the problem.”

Forgotten Ones

Do you remember when you were naive enough to believe you were invincible? Now, imagine yourself as that kid and being told your whole life is being stripped from you before you've even had the opportunity to know what it feels like to live by your own rules. Are you there? Can you see it? Can you feel it? Good!

Sadly and tragically this scenario is much more than an image cooked up by one's imagination!

America is facing a tragedy of epic proportions; an epidemic America is responsible for creating herself within the "justice" system we are taught is supreme to all others.

At this point I'm sure you are wondering what epidemic I'm referring to...

Societies all over the United States have, either by omission or commission, made it acceptable for children to be sent to adult penal institutions. The acceptance of this form of "justice" is not only unacceptable, it's also perverse and counterproductive to the end goal - rehabilitation.

Hello, my name is Meagan Mae Adams. I was arrested at the age of 15 and charged with 1st degree murder. At the tender age of 16 I was certified in the Juvenile Court to stand trial as an adult. In other words, at the age of 15 I was deemed mature enough to stand trial in an adult court and be faced with receiving a prison sentence in an adult prison. The Juvenile Court washed their hands of me. For all intents and purposes I was now an adult.

It's important to note at this time that under the laws on the Texas books a 15-yr. old is not old enough to drive, smoke, drink, or have consensual sex, though by being involved in the commission of an offense, whether directly or indirectly, a 15-yr. old is expected to have an equal level of maturity as that of an adult and to face the same consequences of an adult. Do you see the double standard?

In August of my 16th year I was tried in a Criminal Court, convicted of 1st degree murder, and in September of the same year I was sentenced to LIFE in

the Texas Department of Criminal Justice; a murder my defense team and I proved I was not the principle party of.

Three months later, in December of 2003, I was sent to the Hilltop unit in Gatesville Texas. Nothing in my meagre 16yrs. of life experience prepared me for every form of abuse extortion and manipulation I was subjected to upon reaching the unit I was to call home for the next five years.

Coming to prison as the youngest girl in the female penal system. at that time, I was angry and terrified. I spent the first five to six years of my incarceration struggling to be taken seriously so I would not be seen as easy prey to the many predators lurking in every shadow. I didn't (and still don't) understand how I was fiercely protected from delinquents of this caste one day, yet the next I was suddenly expected to know how to protect myself.

Here I sit, now a 30yr. old woman, at the Lane Murray Unit in Gatesville Texas. In the past 14 1/2 yrs. many things have become clear. and many lessons have been learned. Among the things I've grown to see clearly is the fact that prison is not meant to rehabilitate. Prison is punitive at best and dysfunctionally abusive at worst. Somehow the children, like myself, must wade through the muck and chaos of prison to find out who we are how we'll rise above. Sadly, I've seen many young people lose their true essence to conform to the dysfunction of their surroundings. Amazingly, on the other side of the spectrum are those who, like myself recognise the dysfunction for what it is and learn to soar. Its the second group who decide early on that we will succeed; not because of our limitations but in spite of them.

Children, regardless of circumstance are still kids. Vulnerable and in need of nurturing. Prison does not solve the problem... it exacerbates and perpetuates the very mentalities which landed the child in the predicament they are in. The way juvenile offenders are prosecuted is worth the reconsideration necessary to make a change.

We ARE worth a Second Look!



Justin Dudik

99 year sentence at 15 years old

*“Second chances are a rare thing in life,
but doesn’t everybody deserve at least 1?
If not, how do we learn from our mis-
takes and become better people because
of them.”*

My name is Justin Dudik, I am 40 yrs old, and I have been incarcerated since I was 15 yrs old. In 1993 I was convicted under the law called, "Law of Parties" and sentenced to 99 yrs. aggravated for Aggravated Robbery. The path that lead to that point in my young life is not the one intended by my parents. Like any young teenager I had dreams of growing up and being successful, but not knowing life can change in the blink of an eye, my reality was proof that it could.

So many memories flash through my thoughts as I write this, some of them good, most of them bad. I will never forget being transported to prison, understanding this is my new path, and I will have to travel alone. I had no plan, no strategy, no goals because it is no situation a kid is prepared for. To give voice or to acknowledge the nightmares of this place for a kid would repulse anyone, but I am sure anyone could imagine. In prison there are no positive role models, no heroes and nobody to look up to or give advice on how to be an honorable man. The first, and only thing you learn that is of utmost importance is how to survive, and that goal alone consumes your every thought and action.

Its hard watching yourself grow up in the reflection of a mirror, facial features changing, hair turning grey. Those are the changes I couldn't control, the ones

I could I made the best of I never finished the 9th grade of high school, but I refused to let my academic education end there. I obtained my G.E.D. when I was 19 yrs old, received my barber's license 15 months later, enrolled in community college also obtaining 2 degrees, and I am currently enrolled in U of H for the Bachelor's program. Also along this path I have participated in classes provided by Windham which include Cognitive Intervention, Anger Management, Marriage & Parenting and others that will help in achieving and maintaining a productive and successful life. Please never think that incarcerating a child is a means to educate them, this is just one of the ways to survive that I mentioned and the one I chose.

This missive would not be complete without mentioning the victim of my crime, Mr. David Orlando. He is the man who lost his life in 1993 as a result of my crime. Not a day goes by that I don't think of him or his family and the hurt they suffer from their loss. It is hard now, and as a young kid, knowing I was involved in someone losing their life. Its harder as a grown man reflecting on the past with maturity and experience, knowing what I could have done different. Second chances are a rare thing in life, but doesn't everybody deserve at least one? If not, how do we learn from our mistakes and become better people because of them. That is the example I want my experiences to reflect, a second chance given, or a second chance earned.

Thank You,
Justin Dudick 10.8.2017

Juan Vasquez

Life sentence at 15 years old

“We were just two teenagers caught up, ignorant, wreckless, and lost! There is no way a teenager can reason the same way and adult does, no way!”



JUAN VASQUEZ ①
#0784267
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3872 FM Rd. 350 SOUTH
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My sister Claudia passed away just days ago. She suffered in pain Her last days. Stomach cancer, the medication she was given couldn't cease Her pain on Her last days. She screamed in Horrendous pain, threw up Black remains from the inside on herself, spent most of Her last days in bed, in a hospital room and the last weeks at Her House.

I wasn't physically by Her side through it all, it Hurt me so much just to Hear about it on the phone. My sister's passing Hurts even more than when I basically lost my own life to the prison system. Losing a loved one can Hurt more than losing even your own life.

One night over 20 plus years ago I made a terrible mistake and the worst choice ever in my life. I wish there was a way to turn back the Hands of time, a lot of us probably feel the same... If I only knew what I know now back then... How we can

cherish life on this earth with our loved ones and be there for them, especially when they need us most. I have been in prison 20 plus years since the early age of fifteen, I am now 38 years old. Even if I did not kill anyone myself, under Texas Law I was "certified" to stand trial as an adult and was found guilty of Capital Murder under the "Law of Parties". I never shot or killed anyone, my codefendant was only fourteen. We were just two teenagers caught up, ignorant, reckless and lost! There's no way a teenager can reason the same way an adult does, no way! It's scientifically proven now days.... A teenager cannot marry or even drive a car without parents consent, he cannot buy a cigarette or drink a Beer by Texas law; yet if he is involved in a crime he can automatically be thrown in a grown men prison for the rest of his life? For over 40 Flat, calendar years

before He's even consider an interview by parole! In Court a person can be found innocent by a mere reason of "insanity", because such person cannot reason the same as a normal person or a normal adult can..... so can a "teenager" reason the same way a normal adult can?? If He cannot than why can He be found guilty?? My fourteen year old co-defendant shot someone in May, 1995; I didn't stop it or even tried. Deep in my soul I feel I was so wrongly ~~punish~~ punished, but now I know the one person who was wrongly punished the most that night in May, 1995 was the guy who got shot. and lost His life, I will forever regret being somehow involved. Maybe I could of stopped it, maybe I could of took the gun away from my younger friend, if I only knew what I know now as an adult.... How I value life and can reason clearly, I'm a man now

but was only a child back then, I did childish things, clearly made the worst choice in life ever! Under Texas Law my younger fourteen year old co-defendant could not be "certified" to stand trial as an adult back in 1995; so he was given a 25 year sentence in a Texas Youth Commission (T.Y.C) under Juvenile Jurisdiction. I on the other hand qualified as a fifteen year old, one year older than he was and was "certified" to stand trial as an adult, was found guilty of Capital Murder under the "Law of parties" and was given an automatic life sentence at trial. 40 flat, calendar years before I have any kind of interview with parole, never mind my co-defendant ~~has~~ has gotten out of prison years ago under the same case, he was the shooter, admitted to it at court but because of the one year difference in age he was given a chance at life out of prison, with his family to make a family of his own, yet I cannot, no chance

whatsoever for now, no telling how many more family members I might lose, but I will be stuck in the system almost another 20 years before I can even see parole. So I'm stuck, wishing I could turn back the hands of time. Some things in life are just not fair, not the guy getting shot that night in May, 1995, not my sister suffering extremely with pain in bed withering away in sickness by cancer, or me withering away in the prison adult system at such a young age, life is not fair at times... But I pray for the people to be touched, people who have the power to change the law, make this "second chance law" possible. Some facts of life cannot change, things that happened, we ~~cannot~~ cannot turn back the hands of time but one chance, one change can be given again, **Things** can change when given another chance..... I pray this "second chance law" comes into effect.

Omar Edwards

Double life sentence at 16 years old

“So many in society is misled to believe that a troubled youth cannot be reformed and at times society looks over the realization that the reformation process can occur before the youth is thrown away to adult prisons with lengthy sentences.”

"A Glimpse Into My Life's Journey"

By: Omar Edwards

"Hold it!"; "Freeze!" ----- "You have the right to remain silent... Anything you say, can and will be used against you in the court of law...." These are the words and phrase that is to prevalent in our society. These are also the very words that subjugated the most productive years of my life.

At 16 years of age, while I should have been in school, enjoying my youth, formulating ideas and goals for my life, I found myself being adjudicated to stand trial as an adult. While the reality and seriousness of my situation hadn't yet set in, on May 23, 1991 my situation not only set in as a reality that my young mind refused to accept at that moment, but it also killed my spirit of hope. I was sentenced to (2) two 65 year sentences (later converted into two life sentences in a 1994 retrial).

As a young boy that was lost within his 'self' in society, I felt trapped, dejected, as if my life held no meaning. Days after my initial sentence, I was taken back before the court and received additional sentences of (3) three 60 year prison terms and a 30 year term to run consecutively (later on retrial in 1994, a more harsher sentence was ordered to run consecutively, A life sentence). These sentences arosed from non-homicidal convictions. I was charged and convicted of three counts of agg. robberies and three counts of agg. sexual assaults stemming from two separate robbery episodes.

Do I regret the decisions that I made in my life? "Most Certainly!" Not only do I regret my past mistakes and the decisions I've made in my life in ignorance but I most regret that I violated and imposed upon human life in my undeveloped state of mind.

Like so many young African-American kids, I grew up in poverty, living in a single parent household with seven other siblings. At a young age 12, I was introduced to drugs. I became sexual active at that time and by the time I was 13 years old I'd become a father. I also became a product of my environment. I dropped out of school in the 8th grade, was in and out of juvenile detention, I had no sense of direction. Life as I knew then showed me the opposite of decency and respect. At one point in my life I sadly admit to the world that I was completely lost. I honestly felt that no one loved me. I didn't even love myself at that particular time in my youth, or for lack of better metaphor, I didn't understand love. It was only during my growth and development that God blessed me with the ability to co-relate my life from my childhood to the man I am today.

My early years of incarceration was not easy. Honestly, very frightening. Here I was, a kid being placed around adult convicts. Like the typical kid sent to a adult prison, in order to survive, I felt I had to prove myself by engaging in fights, acting out, trying to impress and give the older convicts the persona that I wasn't to be messed with. This led to my early years

in prison not being productive. I was still in rebellion to that divine nature that we all as human beings possess. I had yet to encounter that individual that would ignite (nurture) that seed of aspiration within my growth and development process by challenging me to evolve and be the best I can be. How can I ever forget that moment which I am eternally grateful for! I was placed in school at the Wynne Unit to get my G.E.D. in 1998. In 1999 I had accomplished that achievement with the help of my first teacher there Mrs. Horton. This lady instilled values in me. Not only did she teach me math, science, history and proper language usage, but most importantly she taught me principles, the true meaning of love and self-worth, she instilled in me the realization that know matter what I have been through in my life, the purpose of my life was meaningful and that I am somebody.

Although I readily admit that I wasn't completely committed to change at that time, the seed was planted and it began its process of growing to shape my life. At times when I reflected, I saw growth, I saw change and I saw God shaping my young mind through good people that I've encountered here in prison. I began to get more involved in programs, sadly to say, in my early years of incarceration there wasn't many I was fortunate to get involved in as far as educational because of the length of my sentence. When your serving a life sentence, your name is put on the back burner of waiting lists. You are not a priority. I did however run to the chapel where I began my spiritual journey to reconnect

myself with God. It was there that I discovered that to find God I had to first find myself for the knowledge of God and self is one and the same. I knew I wanted better for myself so I searched, I labored, the results, the more time and effort I put forth in my growth and development, the more blessings God showered upon me. I've been a coordinator over several Islamic study groups and seeing how other minds looked up to me for spiritual guidance helped shaped me to be a responsible man. To this very day, I love to be in the midst of a developing mind and God willing, be able to offer them what Mrs. Horton offered me, a 'seed' to growth and development. Principles, the true meaning of love and self-worth; Values!

So many in society is misled to believe that a troubled youth cannot be reformed. Given the right opportunity, anyone can be reformed and oft-times society looks over the realization that the reformation process can occur before the youth is thrown away to adult prisons with lengthy sentences. One only have to look at the life of the Hon. Greg Mathis. Here is a man that was a delinquent as a kid, changed his life and became a Judge. He was given an opportunity.

I've been incarcerated now for 27 years. When I first came to prison I felt I'd never see the free world again. The lengthy sentence I received killed my spirit of hope. It is people like Elizabeth Henneke, Deanna Sturgeon Luprete, Lindsey Linder, Alycia Welch, Phillip Yates, Alyssa Morrison, Mandy Miller and all who support these magnificent individuals, gives or re-ignite that spirit of hope in myself

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and so many other youthful offenders. It is also the undeniable love and support of my loving wife Kimberly Johnson that keeps me grounded and motivated to be the best man I can be. I am not only looking for a Second Chance but a Second Look as well. A second chance at life and a Second Look to be a motivational impact on our youth.

This is only A Glimpse Into My Life's Journey. God is still fashioning me, shaping me. Be a avid supporter of that Second Chance. That Second Look!



I Remain In Struggle,
Moving Forward...

I am,

Bro. Omar Ali X

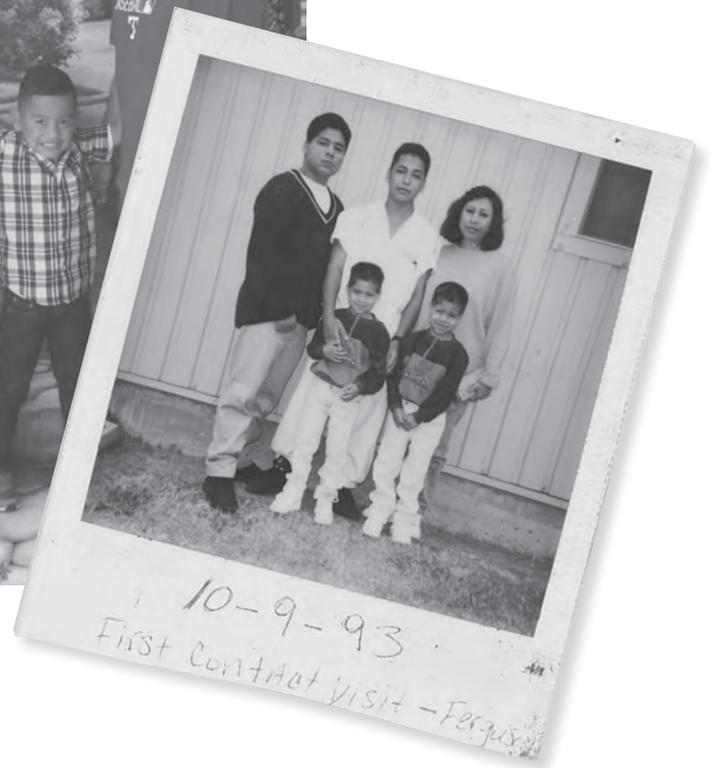
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Omar Ali X', written in a stylized, cursive-like font.



Robert Gonzalez

Life sentence at 15 years old

“Should a child be punished, yes, most definitely. But should a child spend the rest of his natural life in prison for his first crime ever, no they shouldn’t.”



Robert Gonzalez #647502
Hughes Unit
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Imagine yourself or a very close relative of yours being sent to prison at the young age of fifteen, and living his/her life behind those concrete walls until at least the age of fifty. No matter who you^{are}, that is a very grim image, but it is my reality.

My name is Robert Anthony Gonzalez, and April 03, 1992 at 11:15 AM is a date and time that will forever be ingrained into my memory. It was during my sophomore year in high school, while I was in Spanish Class, that Principal Rick Reedy called me out of the classroom so that the Collin County Sheriff's Department could arrest me. As soon as I walk out of the classroom and into the hallway, I see these two big white guys with gold badges, and I knew then that my life was over. As these guys are arresting me in the hallway, I see a few other students running back into their classrooms and immediately students start to come out of other classrooms and watch me being escorted down the hallway and out of the school. I grew up with a lot of those kids, but that will be the last time that I will see or hear from most of them. To most, I am just a faded memory now.

I was Certified to Stand Trial as an Adult on May 13, 1992, then placed inside of a grown man's jail as a 15 year old child. I was convicted of Capital Murder and sentenced to LIFE in prison, of which I must serve 35 calendar years before I am eligible for parole. I will see parole for the very first time on April 02, 2027 and my chances of making the first one are pretty slim. I won't sit here and say that I am not guilty for what I did, I am guilty and very remorseful for doing it. Not a day goes by that I wish I could undo it, not because I was caught, but because it hurt so many people's lives and impacted them in ways no one could have ever thought of. Three lives were taken that night, not just the life of the one person I shot and killed. My life and the girl who was convicted along with me for the crime were also taken that night. Our families were impacted in ways we never could have fathomed because we were just kids. Our brains were not fully developed, and we acted on impulse, not even thinking of any consequences. I know that what I did was wrong, but I just don't believe that a kid, and I was a kid at the age of 15, should spend so much time in prison for any reason. Should a child be punished, yes, most definitely. Should a child spend the rest of his natural life in prison for his first crime ever, no they shouldn't. Politicians would like you to believe that giving kids LIFE in prison acts as a deterrent, but it doesn't. All it does is give adults,

most of who are hardened criminals, easy prey to take advantage of and beat up at will. No matter how big a child may be, his/her maturity level will in no way be on par with a grown adult, so the child will be preyed on. An adult prison is not a place for a child to be, no matter what their crime. We are supposed to be a civilized nation, but what is civilized about placing a child inside of an adult prison to do a LIFE sentence? A child who has never had a job, never had a driver's license, a child who has never even been to a high school prom, yet we feel it is right to place this child inside of an adult prison to do LIFE? There is nothing civilized about that.

When I first came into this prison system, I literally fought for my life for years. I was preyed upon, but I was able to fight my way enough to be left alone after a while. Once I was able to focus on myself and actually do what I needed to better myself, I enrolled in and received my G.E.D., enrolled into college, attended KAIROS and was saved and became a Christian, I have taken numerous Bible Studies, taken a couple of Cognitive Intervention classes, attended AA meetings, taken classes for Anger Management, have read numerous self-help books to better myself and have stayed out of trouble for years now. Things have not been easy, but I know what I must do in order to better myself, and I do it. I know that if I ever do make it out of these concrete walls that I will be watched closely, and will have to be and do more than an average law abiding citizen. I am a convicted murderer, so my life will not be easy once I do get out. The thing is that I don't care, all I want is my freedom after all of these years inside of prison, and I will do whatever I must in order to stay free. It did not take me all of this time to understand that I must abide by laws in order to stay free, I learned that lesson quickly. If given a Second Chance, trust and believe that I will never break the law again. Some may think, or say, "After 25 years, he has finally learned his lesson." But that isn't true, I learned my lesson not long after my incarceration, The rest of those years all I've done is better myself because prison life sure doesn't help you do that.

We are a Christian nation, and Christianity is about love, forgiveness and being given second chances. Kids deserve a Second Chance because they are our future and we should never just "lock em up and throw away the key." Given a Second Chance, I'll be a success story and no longer just a statistic.

Read more about forgiveness on my case @www.dallasnews.com/hopefortherestofus.

David McMillan

Life sentence at 17 years old

“All of us have the ability to change, to become better people. None of us have to stay where we were born; there are no limits when we see our life not as a series of failures, but as ways that didn’t work.

None of us have to stay in the mire of our past. We can use those walls to fill in the mire and build a firm foundation for our future.”

At the age of 17 I was arrested, now at 41 I am still looking at 6 more years before the possibility of parole. In all, if I make parole my first time up 30 years will have passed since my first brush with the law.

Many are the hard lessons I have learned behind the bars of TDCU-10. I wish I could tell you that TDCU as an entity has rehabilitated me and prepared me for reintegration back into society, but I can't. What it has shown me is that in life you need to be proactive instead of reactive if you are going to be successful. Also, that in general people do not want you to think for yourself.

Am I ready for reentry into society, can I make a successful go at life beyond these bars when I am released? Yes! I say yes with full confidence. Why? Because I have changed, my way of thinking has changed. You see, I didn't have a clue who I was before and after my arrest. I thought I was a man because I had sex with different girls. The law said I would be a man on my 18th birthday. Did that mean when I woke up on that day I would know who I was in life, where I fit into society, that my days of not being accepted by anyone, not being good enough, not being able to get it all right were over? No, what it meant was legally I would be considered an adult, but I would still be the same poor white trash high school dropout that was constantly told "you'll never amount to anything" or so I thought. What I found out was much worse. I found out that at 17 when you break the law you are considered an adult. You were thrust directly into a world of adults who knew that world and were more than willing to use and manipulate those who didn't.

Now, 24 years and many scars later, I am the man who is here today. A man of morals and integrity who has been shaped by three main forces. Prison, Faith and Belief. Prison has shown me how men should not be. What happens to men who lose hope and who turn callous because they

Constantly feel the world is dumping on them. Faith, has shown me that I live not for myself but for the One who created me. Belief is the greatest, it is what changed everything. I wasn't a Christian when I found belief, that didn't come until I found Faith. The programs and free world volunteers are what built my belief in a simple idea that changed myself and others so completely once we realized it was true.

What is this great idea? Simply - All of us have the ability to change, to become better people. None of us have to stay where we were born, there are no limits when we see our life not as a series of failures, but as ways that didn't work. None of us have to stay walled in the mire of our past. We can use those walls to fill in the mire and build a firm foundation for our future.

All the programs and classes I have taken are because of this Belief. I wanted to be a better man, so I changed my thinking and my outlook. I wanted not to be stupid white trash, so I learned every job and excelled, I taught myself what I didn't know, and realized that I wasn't stupid and never had been I just didn't learn like others. I want to get out of prison and change the world the way I changed my world.

Ed McMillan #709519

Randy Wood

Life sentence at 17 years old

“At first I was a product of my environment . . . I came to prison at a formable age, and I’ve changed my way of thinking, believing, and living.”



Randy L. Wood
#840867
ALLRED UNIT
2101 FM 369 N.
Iowa Park, TX. 76367

10-7-17

Deanna Stergeon Luprete
P.O. Box 490
Kemah, TX. 77565

Deanna:

I received information from my wife Larissa wood that you are collecting information on juveniles who were charged as adults and received excessive sentences. She sent guidelines as to what subjects to cover, so here is my story.

I'm from southern Oklahoma, and we moved around alot. Mostly I spent my youth in Lawton, I lived all over the city. The lifestyle I was subjected to would best be described as lowkey outlaw!



Alcohol and drugs were always around. I started using and occasionally selling marijuana in 3rd grade. I was a standout athlete, and competed in several sports. As I got older that scene was a constant. We moved a lot between cities and even states while I was in junior High. We finally settled in Wavika Oklahoma my Freshman year. It was here when my alcohol and drug use went wild. I used whatever came along, partying pretty much non-stop for four years! Sports, mainly football was a major part of my life. I had to stay somewhat sober to pass my classes to play football, baseball, and run track. The night of my crime was a normal night like any other, be it school night or not. Pot and alcohol were present.

The crime in question happened on October 3rd 1996. Myself and two others Josh Bagwell, and Curtis Gamble were partying and later in the night Heather Rich came to where we were. Long story short, Curtis murdered Heather. The story has been covered in Texas Monthly magazine twice, and on at least 5 T.V. Programs.

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At the time of the crime I was less than 3 months removed from my 17th birthday. I was the youngest of 53. I went to trial and was convicted of Capital murder in September of 98, I had just turned 19. My reaction to my conviction was one of anger. I acted out for the first few years, and then came to the conclusion that I was just making it harder on myself. I obtained my GED in 1999, and started attending college in 2001. I've since been granted a hardship transfer and there are no college courses available on this unit. I have taken other courses offered by the unit, all being rehabilitative in nature, and some biblical. They were Voyager, New Life Behavior, Experiencing God, Cognitive Intervention. Their duration is anywhere from several weeks to a year. The bad things about prison life, well the obvious. At first I was a product of my environment. It took years to distance myself from acting out, but I can honestly say that when you try to follow rules, and think differently

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You change, the more you change, the easier it becomes. I came to prison at a formable age, and I've changed my way of thinking, believing and living. Mostly I credit God. I am a believer of Christian religion. I had to come to terms with a force greater than myself, and God was it. I've tried to accomplish goals of a man of my comparative age who is free. Obviously a career and children are out of reach, but I do have a job, a wife who I love and step children. Not ideal circumstances for these three areas, but I'm happy and there's all the time and room for improvement. I have found that with someone I love at my side, when I'm living focused on them I'm a better person. My wife is my focus and our future life together is my goal. To make her as happy as she has made me is all I can try.

Well I hope all this is what you were asking for. If not, hopefully you can sift through it and find what you need. Thank you for your time and efforts.
Sincerely
Randy Leonard (4)



Jose Zavala

Life sentence at 17 years old

*“I consider it my duty to do everything
I can to help the kids who come in
here thinking things they shouldn’t.
Helping them realize that they do in fact
have options, helping them appreciate
the value of family out there, taking
advantage of the education and self
awareness classes this place offers.”*

Hello there. My name is Jose M Zavala, and I'm pleased to meet you. To one very special woman, I am a husband, to two beautiful angels I am a father, to quite few I am a friend, and to many I am an acquaintance who merely share a worn path until the road forks for one another, but to the vast majority of society I am nothing but a number. A statistic for those that care enough to check, and a long forgotten memory for those who once knew a young kid that in spite of growing up in a single parented household, with a low-income, in a neighborhood surrounded not just by the ever tempting lure of gang life, but the always promise of "NOTHINGNESS" that heroin granted, managed to steer clear of all that -even if it meant alot of solitude- ,and kept it simple. Music, video games & comic books, and friends. Love, life, and loyalties. I didn't get to go to all the parties everybody went to, I didn't go to proms, I have never seen a prep rally, and to this day I don't know what HOMECOMMING means when I watch movies about high school kids, and I see the banners in the background. I didn't have any designer clothes, nor did I own any name brand shoes, but the one thing that I did own, and possessed it real early in life, was an identity. I knew who I was, and never tried to be anything outside of that. That was my crown jewel, and infinite comfort, and also ultimately my demise.

Or was it???

I am thirty six years old now, soon to be thirty seven in two months, and I have been living in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice since I was seventeen. I have been living in state ordered institutions for juveniles since I was twelve off and on. So the majority of my life has been spent in a controlled environment. I have never taken another person's life, and as ironic as it may sound, someone that the state considered a victim in a case that eventually got thrown out against me, stated that he felt that I was the only reason he still lived, but yet I was convicted of Capital Murder for the only case I've ever known as an adult, and I was not even legally considered an adult yet. I can remember the words of the Prosecutor, Mr. John Cohen, and Mr. Bill Pennington when they told the judge they were vigorously seeking the death penalty. As a juvenile, that simply does not sink in. Sadly, there's even some that consider that a BADGE OF HONOR. The death penalty. For me, I remember being somewhat thoughtful about it. Like, "I guess this is what GOD has in store for me." What rational, fully developed mind thinks like that? I can understand the remorse, but the worst thing I have ever done TO ANYONE, was steal their car, and promptly RAN AWAY if they came out aggressive, but to think that my life was even trade just because I stole someones car is ridiculous, but the LAW OF PARTIES substantiated that trade. In essence, it became that stolen person's car's KARMA. "...Let's kill this child so that the other children know -we mean business!!!" Yea, that's quality community service towards the children of our future, but,... I'm not writing this to spew anger or resentment because the truth of the matter is I'm not angry at anybody but myself.

So moving along, though the DA "VIGOROUSLY" sought the Death Penalty, the jurors felt that there were mitigating circumstances attached to me which eventually led to my life sentence. My age was one of the mitigating circumstances, yet the law of parties ensured that whatever outcome, Death by chemical, or an even slower Death by eventuality, the TOO BROAD STROKE of the LAW OF PARTIES was'n't going to be denied. By law, it left no room for help. For guidance. Just Death in however form it came. So a life sentence it was.

The first unit I went to was the George Beto unit in Tennessee colony. Which was older, full of older individuals, who unfortunately have "other agendas".

Fortunatley for me physical confrontations were not new to me, and the alternative DEFINITLY was. So for X amount of years I made sure that the "ALTERNATIVE" was never going to be an option. Through these years, the small group of immediate family I had trickled to nothing. The only people that stayed with me throughout everything was my grandma in puerto rico, and my aunt jacky in maine. They were the constants in a ever changing environment. New faces, new cell-mates, same stories, same problems. Different seasons, same years, but them... They kept me grounded because you have to understand that even when I was out there, I did'nt WANT brand new shoes, or designer clothes. I wanted a normal life. An older brother who spent time with me, a mother that asked what I did in school, and if I ever got past my shyness, maybe a girlfriend I could share my daydreams with. The way I saw the kids do it on TV. Not some older brother who had too much time not doing ANYTHING, or a mother who just wanted to get high and use people. I had the presence of mind not to get involved with gangs, or do any drugs because everything that was lacking at home (LOVE,LIFE, AND LOYALTY) I told myself that those would be my greatest gifts to someone. And so my grandma and my aunt completely changed my thought process around, not to mention I was getting older, and maturity was telling me that some of the things I was doing was'nt making any sense. Sadly I never thought about getting out because I would see how people stressed over small little years like five and ten, and did'nt want to be like them. Worrying, and worrying about so many of the things that you can't control. This is when I started learning about myself.

Its two thousand seventeen. Man, I still remember when everybody was going crazy when it was going to be two thousand. The world's going to end, the power's going to get cut off,...ha! Well, you're still there, and I'm still here, but I'm a completely different being than the boy who came to prison deadset on not being taken advantaged of,not being considered weak, caring about what people thought of me, and just doing what the next person was doing to survive.

Now, I can stand here and tell you that I'm confident in who I am, and what I've become. I consider it my duty to do everything I can to help the kids who come in here thinking the things they should'nt. Helping them realize that they do infact have options, helping them appreciate the value of family out there, taking advantage of the education, and self-awareness classes this place offers. Life is the one thing that's most precious. Not just for self, but for the people you love. Finding a purpose. That has to be one of the most beautiful journey's I've ever embarked because of my situation and it unique elements, it had to be something I really wanted. Something I told myself I owed to the people I let down by coming here. I often daydream about the opportunity If ever it arose, that I would get a second chance at life, what I would do. I don't have the room for the goals on this paper. Besides finding more than just a job, but a career that I can flourish in, helping other kids that were/are in my situation. Showing society that there can be rehab in prison if you really want it. We all are'nt angry at the world. I'm not at least. I'm thankful for more than I deserve. I don't know who will read this, or if anybody will read this, but just know that I'm grateful for your time in my outpouring of truth because this is how I feel, and this is now my life.

We need to get together and do something about the law of parties, and the effects it has on our children. They don't deserve to have their life taken so early.

Always,
Mr. James M. [Signature]

Chance Gonzales

45 year sentence at 15 years old

“I didn’t and couldn’t understand life at the age of 15. I thought I knew everything and would learn the hardest lesson in my life - I didn’t know anything.”

“As the man I have become now, I’m nowhere close in the resemblance of the child that comitted the crime I am here for. There is almost nothing of that child left.”

To whom it may concern,

When I was 15 years old in March of 1996 I was incarcerated for the crime of capital murder. I shot and killed a man while in the act of running out of a store with a few cases of beer. I'm not from the ghetto. I didn't grow up poor or suffering hardship. I have no excuse for my actions back then. I was a gang member from the suburbs. I thought I was so cool and tough. Infatuated with tv and gangster rap, I thought my life was a movie and I was the sole star. I didn't and couldn't understand life at the age of 15. I thought I knew every thing, and would learn the hardest lesson in my life, I didn't know anything.

At 15 I was certified to stand trial as an adult and ended up sentenced to 45 years in prison for the lesser offense of murder. I quickly realized another hard lesson, that I was never as tough as I used to think I was. I have never been angry or bitter about my incarceration. I know that I deserve it. However, after my first 5-6 years I was in a bad place and I found myself questioning the meaning of life, contemplating ending it all. I couldn't come up with an answer until I thought about it from another perspective. I asked myself that if I had one day to live what would be important? I quickly realized that my family and loved ones would be the only thing that mattered. From that point I began to realize the preciousness of life and love. I finally began to understand what it was that I took from another human being. I can never give that man his life back, or give a wife her husband, or a child their father. I will live with that fact for the rest of my life. I can never make what I did right. All I can do is live the best way

that I can and hope that maybe there are people that will be better off for it.

I've been in my share of trouble while in prison. I've tried not to hurt anyone if I could avoid it. Instead I made a decision to educate myself and to surround myself with people I could learn from. I came to prison with a 10th grade education. I quickly got my GED, associates degree, and I will graduate with my bachelors in the beginning of 2018. I am now 37 years old and I know that I deserved every day I've been in prison. I will be eligible for parole in Sept. 2018 for the first time and I hope to be given a second chance.

As the man I have become now, I'm no where close in the resemblance of the child that committed the crime I am here for. There is almost nothing of that child left. I cut a persons life short and in turn wasted so much of mine. I hurt countless people and I will for ever be sorry. But I feel that I still have so much in me to give, I just hope for the opportunity to give it. My deepest fear is that in punishment for the biggest mistake a child could make, my life will be thrown away in turn. With a 45 year sentence there is no guarantee that I will ever regain freedom. For years my young mind couldn't even conceive of the concept of 45 years. I truly believed I'd die in prison and even now I'm unsure.

What I know is that there is still good in me and the other kids that came here and grew up in here also. Faced with the bleak consequences of our mistakes we came to a turning point in which we are faced with a choice of becoming better or giving up. Most of us have chosen to be better and we just need a chance to show it.

Chance Lamiales

Aaron Dyson

50 year sentence at 17 years old

“Omar’s murderer was sentenced to 30 years for killing him and I was sentenced to 50 years for shooting him for killing Omar. I cannot defend my act of vengence, but even so, it is hard to fathom the injustice in these two sentences.”

James Aaron Dyson
#815938

In the throes of rage, sorrow, and youthful ignorance, I took the law into my own hands. I shot a man after he was released on bail following his arrest for the murder of my childhood friend, Omar P. Alvarado, behind a dispute over the affection of a young girl. As a seventeen year old kid, I was charged and convicted of Engaging in Organized Crime, and was sentenced to fifty years in prison. Several months thereafter, Omar's killer was convicted of his murder and was sentenced to thirty years. Yes, you read that correctly; Omar's murderer was sentenced to thirty years for killing him and I was sentenced to fifty years for shooting him for killing Omar... I cannot defend my act of vengeance, but even so, it is hard to fathom the injustice of these two sentences.

It is said that justice is served fairly by a jury of one's peers. Whose peers? By whose evaluation? I myself was a kid whose life rested in the hands of twelve adults. Regrettably for me, they were twelve adults who possessed no expertise in child psychology, nor were they even instructed to take my age and diminished capacity into account. Clearly, they were no peers of my own. Upon arriving into the Texas prison system, I was given an educational assessment test, which determined that I possessed a sixth grade education. It is pretty embarrassing to admit, but I could hardly read, write, or spell. For the life of me, I could not understand any of the proceedings of my trial and my attorney afforded no explanations. Why bother explaining something to a kid who was clearly too young to comprehend such methodology?

Two decades ago, I stepped off of a prison bus at the back gate of Ferguson Unit, arguably the worst prison in Texas, and infamously known as the Gladiator Farm. Shortly after arriving, I discovered that I was the second youngest inmate in the entire prison. Imagine a kid being yanked from a loving home, stripped of everything, and then tossed into the pits of hell and you will have taken a glimpse of how my youth unfolded. Needless to say, those early years were difficult for me, but in those years of tragedies and tribulations I found growth beyond explanation.

He who is brave enough to peer into the darkness
in search of goodness
will be the first to see a flicker of light...

Being shackled for the majority of my life has opened me up to a perspective about life that very few who have not walked in my shoes can or ever will understand. It has pushed me towards a deeper understanding about the preciousness of life and love and has taught me my own worth with amazing clarity. When you find yourself starving for something, you learn the extraordinary value of it: self-worth, the desire to love, the yearning to be loved, freedom, life... It is said that nothing easily gained is worth any real value. I must confess, what I have gained in my heart and mind is worth more to me than an elephant's weight in gold.

Since the years of impetuous immaturity have faded away, I have often found myself contemplating the thoughtless decision I made at that young age and how it not only changed the course of my life, but also altered the lives of all of the people who love me. The thought seems to always linger of where we would all be in life had I not taken the law into my own hands. Would those who love me have been proud of the man I would have become? Would I have found an amazing wife to love? Would I have been blessed with children? Would I have had something greater to live for? Though there is certainty in nothing in life, the possibilities are endless of what might have been.

As my incarceration creeps towards the quarter of a century required of me, I think about how far I have come in my life despite the enormous odds stacked against me in a system designed for one to fail. My spiritual love for Christ, and the character it created within me. The college education I obtained as I fought through learning disabilities. A wonderful discovery and love I have found in literature. Because of the hard road I have traveled, I have found a passion and deep desire to educate our youth so that they will not fall into the same mistakes and be forced to endure the horrors so many of us have had to accept as life. So much of my life was lived in darkness because of my environment, but through maturation and a yearning for something better, I found the courage to peer into the darkness and it was then that I found the flickering light of hope. A hope for a future... A hope for an opportunity at redemption... A hope to show that I am not a bad person, but a person who just made a bad decision...



Fredrick Alexander

Life sentence at 17 years old

“People like me change because they desire to. We accept and understand our part in the damage caused by our misguided lifestyles of distant pasts and strive to build and grow toward a brighter future.”

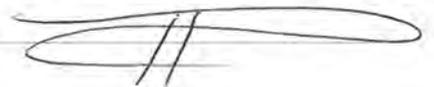
WED 10.11.17

AFTER BEING INCARCERATED THE LAST 22 PLUS YEARS, ITS FUNNY HOW THE GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT OF A 17 YR. OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN KID CAN CHANGE ONCE HIS ENVIRONMENT CLOSES IN ON HIM. BEING DEAF, DUMB & BLIND TO THE REALITY OF WHAT LIFE'S PURPOSE IS REALLY ALL ABOUT. BEING A PRODUCT OF MY ENVIRONMENT LEAD ME 2 DIRECT MY ATTENTION TOWARDS THINGS THAT HAD NO MEANING, INSTEAD OF FOCUSING ON WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT... FAMILY & BEING A PRODUCTIVE MEMBER OF MY COMMUNITY & SOCIETY. YOU CANT TEACH SOMEONE ABOUT LIFE, IF YOU HAVEN'T LIVED! HOW CAN YOU SHOW THEM THE WAY, WHEN YOU DONT KNOW YOURSELF. THESE THOUGHTS PUSHED ME INTO THE STREETS, WHERE I ACCOMPLISHED NOTHING BUT PAIN & REGRET.

AM I WROTE FOR LOOKING AT THE MAN IN THE MIRROR & DESIRING CHANGE? SOCIETY THINKS I AM!! BUT HE WHO HAS NO SEAS CANT LAID THE FIRST STONE. I BELIEVE I'M A PRODUCTIVE LEADER WITH MORE TO GIVE THAN

NOT. THOSE THOUGHTS TOOK ME ON A SOUL SEARCHING JOURNEY WHICH ALLOWED ME TO ANSWER A LOT OF LIVES QUESTIONS OF SELF, AS TO WHO I AM & WHAT MY LIVES PURPOSE TRULY WAS. NO LONGER AM I A PROMOTER OF DESTRUCTION, LIVING IN THE LIFE OF A CHAIN MEMBER. THIS IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST DESTROYERS NEXT TO DRUG ABUSE IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES & BEYOND. AT 40 YRS. OLD I'M NOW ABLE TO ATTACK THE SOLUTION THAT WAS HIDDEN FROM ME DURING MY YOUTH. THE WORLD IS SO SEGREGATED THAT WE AS HUMANS FORGET THAT HELPING ONE ANOTHER REGARDLESS OF RELIGION, RACE - OR - CREED IS WHAT WE'RE MEANT OR CREATED FOR - ADVANCEMENT. MOST DON'T REALIZE THAT YOU CAN LEARN A LOT FROM A PERSON WHO'S LIVED IN SOLITUDE, WHEN YOUR THOUGHTS & HOW TO HANDLE THEM IS ALL YOU HAVE. THIS SYSTEM WAS DESIGNED FOR YOU TO FAIL & TO OPPRESS, NOT REHABILITATE BUT SOCIETY HAS BEEN MISLED BY THE FACADE DISPLAYED. PEOPLE LIKE ME CHANGE BECAUSE THEY DESIRE TO. WE ACCEPT & UNDERSTAND OUR PART IN THE DAMAGED CAUSES BY OUR MISDESIRED LIFESTYLES OF DISTANT PASTS & STRIVE TO BUILD & GROW TOWARD A BRIGHTER FUTURE. OPPORTUNITY ALLOWS ONE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE BUT FIRST YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE YOU CAN - THIS MY JOURNEY IS NO WHERE NEAR COMPLETE !!

WRITTEN BY: FREDRICK ALEXANDER



Alejandro Garzes

25 year sentence at 17 years old

“I want to be a husband. I want to be a father. I want to be that person to someone that I never had.”



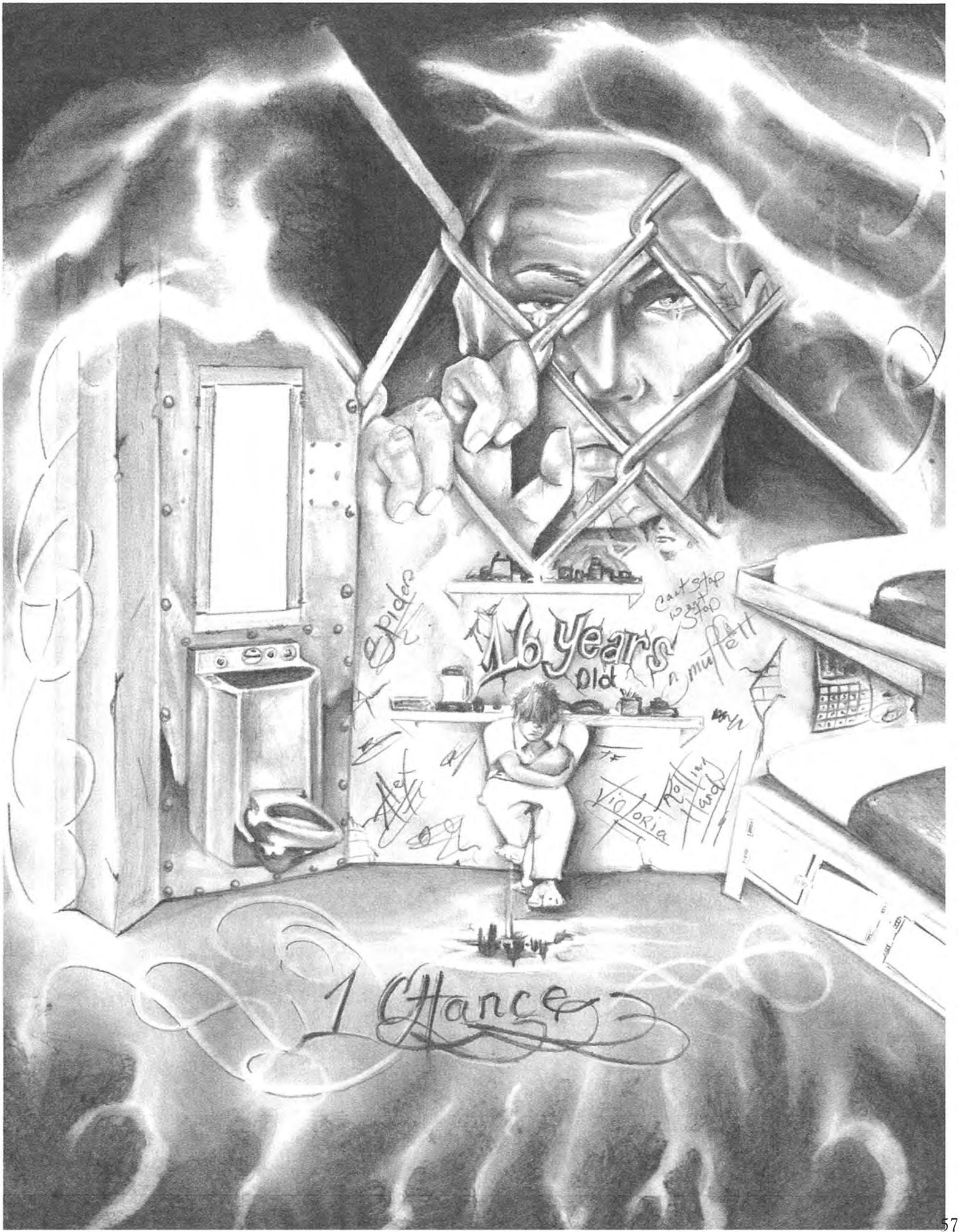
My Name is Alejandro Garza #851955. I was Born and Raised in San Antonio, TX. In the west side of town. I've been an inmate since the age of 16. I have served 22 years and have never paroled. I came from a single parent home which involved poverty, domestic violence, death and gangs. When I was 8 years old, my only role model which was my older brother got killed by a drunk driver. My mother couldn't handle the loss of my brother and the separation from my father. I felt like a burden to her; so I ran away from home. I was now looking for a family, someone to accept me, someone to love me so at age fifteen I got involved with the wrong crowd which led me to where I am at, this present moment. TDCJ. At age sixteen I was convicted as an adult. I was confused and lost with no direction from my parents or my family. The people that swore they would stick by my side abandon me. I had lost everything. There was nothing left for me just to serve my time. I hated myself for what happened. I hated the world. I blamed everyone for my mistakes but that's the way a 16 year old kid thinks. After 20 years of hell, I just felt like giving up, just wanted to die, threw myself on the floor and begged God for mercy for him to give me direction to bless me with something to give me a chance at life, a reason to live. That night I fell asleep crying on the floor. A couple weeks later God blessed me with a life partner. During those years of incarceration I have become a man, the day I accepted God I became a man of God a real man. I have not only learned to forgive others, I have

Also learned to Forgive myself for all the mistakes that I have made. I also learned how to Read and write. I have Focused on God and Art as a way of channeling my energy. I have enhance my knowledge through Religious and Coping Skill studies. I have won 3rd place in the International prisoner's Art Contest. I have a piece of my artwork that was published as a cover for the Book, "A Separated Love, Life with a Incarcerated Loved one, that you would enjoy. I am no longer the same person. I am a new creation in God's eyes and I am thankful and grateful for all the Blessing he has given me. He has Blessed me with so many talents. He has also Blessed me with the most wonderful, Beautiful wife and Family that if given a chance is waiting for me with open arms. I want to be a husband. I want to be a father. I want to be that person to someone that I never had. I want to be that person that looks back at my past and says "Thank you God for changing my life and giving me a second lost. My name is:
Alejandro Gages #851955



Art pieces by
Alejandro Garzes





Spider

16 Years Old

can't stop
to get
500

a muppet

Victoria

put in
hand

1 Chance

Patricia Ray

Life sentence at 15 years old

“I dream of being able to use this experience, all that was lost, to help other broken little girls maybe not feel so broken. I want to help them love their selves so they don’t make the same mistakes I did and so that they know they deserve better than what so many of us are taught to accept and settle for. Also maybe help parents realize that their children need them so much.”



I often tell people that one of the hardest things is to try to turn emotions into thoughts to form verbal words. I mean, we as humans have learned to turn rock into jewelery, the sun rays into electricity, and plants into healing medicines. But ask someone to explain their pain and more times than not you will get a blank stare or a bunch of words thrown together that hardly make sense.

With that being said, this will be one of the hardest letters I have ever written because I have absolutely no idea how to put so much into so little. It almost feels like I am trying to force the sun into the moon. This is also the first time I will openly share my feelings because I have always considered the feelings and pain of all who were effected by my actions or lack of, especially the family of the person who lost her life.

My name is Patricia Ray. I am currently serving a life sentence under the law of parties for capital murder. I was sixteen at the time of my arrest, seventeen when convicted and am now thirty one years old. I have spent the last fifteen years growing up in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

I am going to skip all the details of the crime that is already public knowledge and talk about what happened that is the true cause of a very important and very loved person losing her life.

The thing that separates humans from animals is the ability of free will and to truly know love.

My earliest memory is of my parents physically fighting each other, which doesn't seem so out of the norm for a lot of people. What is a little off is I was not scared or crying. I was already used to it and knew later they would be okay. My daddy would hug me and tell me he loved me. This would be my first lesson in love.

My second lesson in love comes years later after my parents split for good and it was decided I would live with my mother. I grew up around her family, who were all busy fighting their own inner demons. So when someone I was taught to trust, love and depend on stole a piece of my innocence, I felt as if I had no where to turn to for comfort or safety. Of course I had my daddy, but he was my one escape, my vacation island where reality didn't exist. If I told him I would lose that or so believed at eleven years old, so I bottled it inside and found reckless ways to deal because that's what everyone else did.

Eventually I met someone who was just as lost, just as broken and just as alone as me. He understood me because for the most part he was me. As the cycle continues our relationship became abusive. That's all he knew and as long as he held me afterwards, told me he was sorry and he loved me, then it was okay, right? Because the people who love you, hurt you, or so I believed then.

This all leads to the night of so much being lost and stolen. Two children from broken homes, abused in different ways, filled with pain and anger, having no direction, no guidance, no purpose and no sense of self. There truly are no more words to explain the depths of pain and destruction that will always remain extended in time, not just within myself but within three families.

Spending the last fifteen years dealing with it all, trying to make sense out of the senseless and mostly trying to make the most out of myself has been almost like struggling to climb

to the top of a vortex. You get so far before the guilt and pain sucks you down again.

On the other side of that is where I find my peace. Considering all of that I am able to now wake up every day with an appreciation for life I could have never found before. I have a sense of self as a woman and am blessed to know who I am. I have belief and hope and confidence. I have even found my dreams.

To most, my dreams may seem like everyday life because they start off small like having a real job, receiving a paycheck, paying a bill, and knowing what it's like to truly have responsibility. To add to society and our economy. To be a part of the whole. My dreams then grow bigger. I dream of being able to use this experience, all that was lost, to help other broken little girls maybe not feel so broken. I want to help them love their selves so they don't make the same mistakes I did and so that they know they deserve better than what so many of us are taught to accept and settle for. Also maybe help parents realize that their children need them so much.

Every day in a place like this is a struggle. There is so little to motivate you. Having a lot of time leaves you with limited options. Education is not free, like it is for short timers. After so many years of being incarcerated your outside sources start to move on. You are ultimately left with yourself. Who you become in here is truly of your own making. You have to possess self will, self endurance, self discipline, and mostly self motivation. All of these things build self belief and confidence that you are not the you of yesterday and most definitely not the you of fifteen years ago.

With all of this being said, if I were given a second chance at life outside this vortex, I have not a single doubt that a quote made in the newspaper all those years ago that something good needed to come out of something so bad could be made possible. I know this because I now possess knowledge that there is good in the world, that you are not limited just to what your eyes can see. And I know that reality is what you make of it. I am no longer a lost little girl trying to fight demons. I am a woman who picked up her own pieces and dreams of a future where I am able to experience real life and add positive to all the negative. I dream of a second chance.

Patricia Ray





CLEMENS' KIDS

Clemens Unit, Brazoria, Texas

Introduction to
The Clemens' Kids
by Chon Dimas

“My closest friends are drastically different from me, but a group of the unlikeliest friends comprising a diversity of class, racial demographic, and cultural expectations came together for a common goal: to survive our incarceration and become better for it.

In the letters that follow, you will meet this band of friends, all convicted youth serving excessively long prison sentences for violent crimes and whom were cast into the adult prison system to fend for ourselves among the worst threats to life, the most depraved influences, and against extraordinary odds, and yet, whom managed to rise above all that breeds below.”

Against Heavy Odds: The Rise of Fallen Youth

As a civilized society, we try to protect our nation's youth by prohibiting them from engaging in adult-privileged liberties. We strive to protect them from the long-term ill-effects of regretful experiences, especially those concerning drugs, alcohol, and tobacco; pornography and under-age sex; guns, gangs, and violence; and the negative influence of criminal delinquency. Essentially, we try to protect our youth from themselves. Neuroscience shows that the human brain, the prefrontal cortex in particular, does not fully develop until one's early to mid-twenties, which leaves youthful minds cognitively impaired without full reasoning capability; hence, their need for protection against themselves.

However, since Texas' "tough on crime" era began in the 1990s, our criminal justice system quit protecting our youth, and, instead, began treating juvenile delinquents severely as adults by punishing them with excessively long prison sentences and sending many of them as young as the age 14 to adult prisons. Although neuroscience in no way excuses youthful criminality, it does warrant a need for differing degrees of culpability and punishment between youthful and adult criminals. If our youth are protected by restricting them from adult liberties by law due to their inability to make fully rational and prudent decisions, then it reasons that such youth should be protected under the same ideological law by restricting them from the severity of adult punishment since youthful deviance occurs during their cognitive impairment.

As it stands, many youth have been and still are sentenced to harsh prison terms and sent into the adult prison system. Texas has a Youthful Offender Program in place that serves to keep youthful offenders (ages 14 to 17) separated from adult offenders, which is ironic considering the funding for juvenile detention centers and the establishment of the Texas Youth Commission (TYC).

Nonetheless, as a youthful offender who experienced this Youthful Offender Program located at the Clemens Unit in Brazoria, Texas, and then spent roughly nine more years there in general population, I can vividly tell you that, while good in theory, the program is largely ineffective in practice. Although the program attempts to restrict interaction between youthful and adult inmates, the youth are never completely isolated from their adult counterparts. Predators seek new prey, gangs seek new recruits, and new arrivals in their incarcerated nascentcy seek how to "do time" and how to earn their respect, which essentially translates into learning to imitate adult inmate behavior. As the saying goes, "Where there's a will, there's a way."

Moreover, the Youthful Offender Program doesn't protect youthful convicts from the harsh reality of adult prison life. The general reality of the incarcerated life is that prison is a dog-eat-dog world where violence and abuse run rampant, psychological manipulation is prevalent, and insanity threatens the minds of the strong and weak alike. Prison is notoriously known as a place of respect, but respect is a misnomer used in place of fear because few people want to openly admit they are afraid of anything or anyone. Therefore, our convicted youth are essentially sent to a place of fear where barbarianism reigns over civility. Can you imagine the terror in the minds of 14 to 17 year old teenagers as they enter an adult prison? While most youth are used to scuffling over inconsequential matters, few are ever prepared for the cultural shock of prison life where it's common to witness or be forced to fight, sometimes with weapons, to defend oneself from assault, theft, or rape. Every inmate faces the triune struggle of prison life. The first struggle is the physical test of fighting, which usually occurs the first day but may continue for days, weeks, or even months. Those who fight earn respect and are left alone; those who don't fight usually become prey for verbal, physical, or sexual abuse, extortion (payment to stop

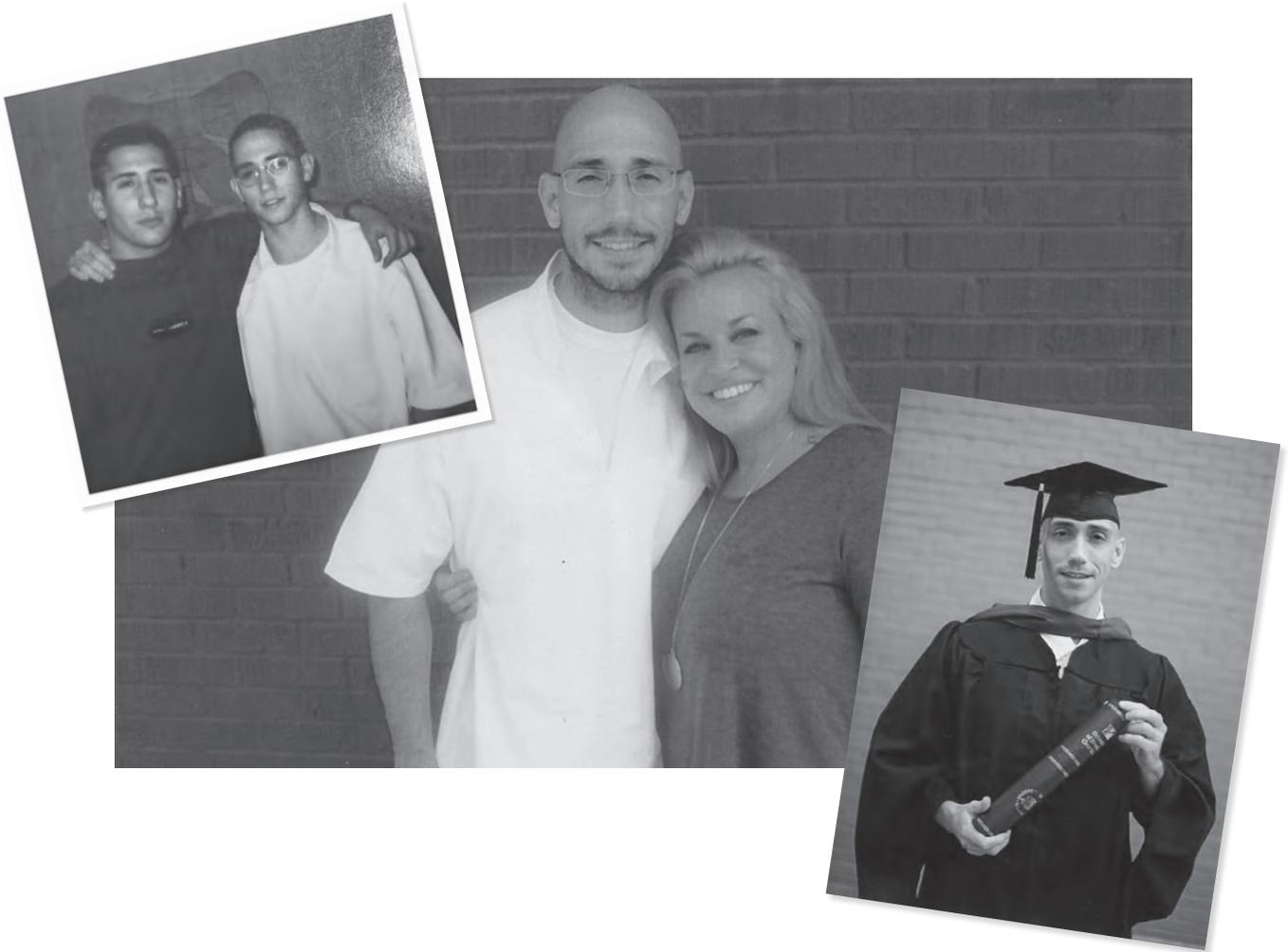
abuses), and forced servantry (chores such as cell cleaning, clothes washing, cooking, etc.) to name a few victimizations. The second struggle is a never-ending mental battle between fear and courage, despair and hope, defeat and resilience, and the will to live or die. The third struggle involves a spiritual test in which one begins to question his or her personal worth and the existence of God, resulting in either total conformity to hedonistic prison culture or pursuit toward a higher transcendental calling.

No one can completely escape the madness of prison, but everybody chooses how they will respond to it. Although inmates must initially conform to certain prison norms to survive, a good sign of rehabilitation will be increased non-conformity. Rehabilitative success is rarely achieved alone, which is why the people one surrounds himself or herself within the prison walls are as crucial as support systems outside the walls. Most inmates become stagnant because they remain separated by lines of race, ethnicity, gang affiliation, and sexual orientation. However, there exists a bold, hopeful minority who defy divisive lines, and from this minority emerge enclaves of support and encouragement for self-betterment through education, religion, and various other rehabilitative outlets. My closest friends are drastically different from me, but a group of the unlikeliest friends comprising a diversity of class, racial, demographic, and cultural expectations came together for a common goal: to survive our incarceration and become better for it. In the letters that follow, you will meet this band of friends, all convicted youth serving excessively long prison sentences for violent crimes and whom were cast into the adult prison system to fend for ourselves amongst the worst threats to life, the most depraved influences, and against extraordinary odds, and, yet, whom managed to rise above all that breeds below. What brought us friends together while at the Clemens Unit roughly a decade and a half ago was positivity and faith that there exists something better for us than a life in prison, and what binds us together is our hope that one day we will get a second chance at life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Chon Dimas

75 year sentence at 17 years old

“My survival has largely been fueled by hope of a second chance at life, and I am living proof that youthful offenders are not beyond hope or rehabilitation.”



My name is Chon Patrick Dimas, and on its surface, my story is simple: In 1998, at the age of 17, I was convicted of 1st degree murder and sentenced to 75 years in prison. However, beneath the surface rests a core of unearthed layers that most people aren't privy to and, therefore, don't understand my crime. I blame nobody but myself for my criminal actions, but mitigating factors existed that help explain what spurred me to take my victim's life.

After experiencing life in a foster home at an early age and then as the youngest child in a single-parent home in which I was forcibly separated from my mother, I felt detached from any sense of belonging and I was never able to open up to anyone. As a result, I harbored a childhood of resentment. Leading up to the fateful day of my crime, I lived with my dad and one of his girlfriends, Joyce, a woman with whom I experienced no amicability. One June morning in 1998, while I was home alone enjoying a rare coveted phone call with my mom, Joyce returned from a double shift at one of the prisons she worked at. When she heard I was talking to my mom, with whom she shared a hostile history, Joyce snatched the phone from me, screamed berating profanities, and then threatened to kill her by setting her apartment on fire while she was asleep. Whether Joyce fully intended to or not, I perceived her words as a real threat, and as raw emotion and the instinct of preservation of life clouded all rationality, I impulsively grabbed a nearby gun and shot Joyce firmly believing I'd be saving my mom's life. Upon realizing the magnitude of my actions, I feared the wrath of my dad—a Vietnam veteran and Marine—and, in panic, I tried to destroy the evidence of what I had done before he returned home.

I deeply regret the rash actions of my crime because they affected many others besides my victim and myself. The more I think about it, the more plausible it seems that Joyce threatened my mom out of mere emotionality rather than ill-intent. Plus, my mom ended up dying of a heart attack

eight years later, which I believe was largely induced by the stress and heartache stemming from my incarceration. Therefore, if my actions to save my mom ultimately contributed to her premature death, then my crime was futile and doubly damning, and in that light, I burn with regret all the more.

As a youthful offender cast into the predatory den of the adult prison system, I strived to endure the onslaught of physical, mental, and spiritual hardship while searching for even the slightest ray of hope. Facing a 75 year sentence of which I must serve 30 years before becoming parole eligible, darkness threatened to engulf me, but by the grace of God after nearly 20 years, I have survived with my health, sanity, and faith intact. My survival has largely been fueled by hope of a second chance at life, and I am living proof that youthful offenders are not beyond hope or rehabilitation.

In my maturation from a rash youth into a rational adult, I've not only learned to think consciously before I act, but I possess greater respect for authority under human law and the highest order of law under God. I am far from perfect, but I strive toward excellence and I daily resist becoming a product of my environment. My exemplary prison record reflects admirable conduct and good stewardship of my "time." To detach myself from the infectious negativity of prison culture, I pursued an education and participated in available rehabilitative programs. To date, I have earned four college degrees (an AA in Liberal Arts, a BS in Behavioral Science, a MA in Literature, and a MA in Christian Education), a college trade (in Computer Repair), five On-The-Job Vocational Trainings, and nine TDCJ rehabilitative programs (two more of which I am currently enrolled). My prison record testifies of my transformative maturation and self-betterment, exudes my longing desire to rejoin society, and reflects my propensity for success. My amazing fiancé and future mother-in-law tell me that I don't act like someone who has been incarcerated for as long as I have been. Their compliment is a further testament to the rehabilitative success and growth of the person I've become.

— Chon Dimas

Jeremy Gartrell

50 year sentence at 16 years old

“After divorce rocked my world, it was an abusive step-dad who didn’t understand how to properly discipline a child. This combination of pain, fueled by the liquid devil called alcohol, produced a hurt, very angry 16 year old heart and kid.”



First of all, before introducing myself, it should be acknowledged that Jesus Christ comes first in my life and I give him all the honor, glory, and praise. I love my family with all my heart. They have never turned their back on me and continue to support me in every way to this day. My Mother's love is the closest thing to God's unconditional love, yet I cherish my relationship with the Lord above all.

Secondly, my name is Jeremy Gattrell and I am 39 yrs. old. The past 22 yrs. of my life have been spent behind the bricks, bars, and fences of T. Do. Co. J. Before writing about what the Lord has taught me and blessed me to achieve throughout these many years, I will give a brief insight how this bad, God turned good, journey began.

It began like the majority of men's life who are incarcerated — a broken home. After divorce rocked my world, it was an abusive stepdad who didn't understand how to properly discipline a child.

This combination of pain, fueled by a liquid devil called alcohol, produced a hurt, very angry 11 yrs. old heart and kid. Before moving on let me make it clear, this is NO EXCUSE for any of my actions. As a man, I take full responsibility for my choices and blame nothing or anybody but myself.

Moving on, the streets became a place I could express my hate and anger through fighting, gangs, and violence and also make a name for myself and earn the respect my scarred heart desired.

During this troubled time of my life, I made a decision that I will forever regret. One the Lord knows that I am truly sorry for and that if I could go back and change it, I would. That decision was to steal a car but it ended in disaster — an innocent man was killed and an innocent family destroyed.

This senseless crime led to my arrest (really my point of rescue) and charge of Capital Murder. I was tried and certified as an adult at 11 yrs. old and sent to the Galveston County Jail in September of 1994.

I was blessed to eventually bond out.

Now, the reason why I use the term blessed in reference to making bond is due to the fact that while out on bond, the Lord in his Mercy called my name, drew me to him, and granted me repentance and saving faith. Jesus delivered me from that thug life and blessed me with eternal life. So now I was forgiven by God, as Jesus took my punishment for my

Sins. But, I had also sinned against an innocent man, his family, and society. My punishment for that came about on Oct. 23rd 1995. The judge sentenced me to 50 yrs. agg. in To Do Co. J. I would have to complete 25 calendar years before parole eligibility.

After receiving this time I was assigned to the Clemens Unit. I was 17 yrs old and as mentioned earlier, I was no longer a thug but a Christian. The rough and rugged world of prison would be my new "home" and testing ground of my new found faith. I had made up my mind that I was gonna live, stand, and die if necessary for my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It was said to me by many inmates that I would never make it in the prison world living that way. God doesn't manifest his work by coward's - that statement was made 22 yrs ago - By God's grace I'm still standing for him on the two feet he blessed me with, and boldly serving him with all my heart. In the midst of all the madness within the penitentiary Jesus blessed me to maintain my focus on him, my family, and my future freedom.

This focus has also led to a disciplinary record of only two minor cases (1) missing school - 2) not making bed properly) received in 1996. It has also led to a 9th grade dropout obtaining his G.E.D., Associates degree, Bachelors degree, and I am currently 9 classes away from a Masters degree. I believe in striving for excellence in every area of my life (spiritually, mentally, and physically) and I'm also a firm believer that actions speak louder than words. I am also involved in the faith based dorm. I completed 1 yr. as a participant and fixing to complete my 2nd year of being a mentor in the program. I have learned the valuable lesson of what it means to be a true servant-leader. Through other programs offered on the unit such as Bridges to life, Voyager, Quest for manhood, etc, I have learned many other valuable lessons such as the impact crime has on people, the power of forgiveness, thinking errors, how to deal with different personalities, and what it means to be a man in God's eyes.

There is a false notion that we're "men" because we're born males, but this is untrue. We become men when we take and accept responsibility! A real man is characterized by his compassion, courage, obedience to authority, humility, uncompromising integrity, and many other honorable traits. I came to prison a male, but today Jeremy Gartrell is a real MAN because of Jesus Christ.

In closing, I thank God for being the game changer in my life and using me for his glory. I have learned that life is like sports - It's not how you start but how you finish! Glory be to God. JESUS OVER EVERYTHING.

IN HIS SERVICE,
Jeremy Gartrell
Dorm # 238 (2)

Reaz Ahmed

85 year sentence at 16 years old

“Though I was surrounded by hundreds of prisoners, I remember feeling completely alone. Although solitude has all the elements that could cause dysfunctional behavior, it also leads to self reflection and that can ignite a torch of enlightenment.”

Who Is Reaz Ahmed? #787157

Huntsville "The Walls" Unit
815 12th Street
Huntsville, Texas 77348



I was born and raised in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In 1991, at the age of 10, my family and I immigrated to Dallas, Texas. I was clueless of the culture shock theory and yet, I experienced its effect in every aspect of my new environment. For the first time in my life, outside influences shaped my character. Feeling a sense of excitement, I became drawn into the "street culture." The adventurer in me enjoyed the fast and dangerous lifestyle, as well as the reputation it created.

In 1996, at the age of 16, I was certified to stand trial as an adult for capital murder. Prior to this, I had never been to jail. However, that reality changed for me almost immediately, after I made one devastating choice that ended a precious life and destroyed many others. I was convicted of murder and sentenced to 85 years in maximum security prison. I had no idea how to survive it and believed my life was over.

In 1997, I was assigned to the Clemens Unit, better known as "Burning Hell." My fearful instinct was my only source of guidance and, by far, my only reliable faculty in those moments. The possibility of being attacked, both physically and mentally, was frightening. Therefore, I knew that in order to survive my new "home" I had to protect myself "by any means necessary." Though I was surrounded by hundreds of prisoners, I remember feeling completely alone. Although solitude has all the elements that could cause dysfunctional behavior, it also leads to self reflection. And that can ignite a torch of enlightenment.

In 1998, by God's grace, that torch lead to my conditioning into a rehabilitative awakening. I began on an educational journey that transformed my behavior and lifestyle. Following the completion of my GED, I finished two college trades in computer science and computer repair. In 2007, I graduated from Alvin Community College with a liberal arts degree and the next year I applied for a Bachelors Degree in Behavioral Science at the University of Houston Clear Lake. Following my graduation for my Bachelor's, I received a scholarship for my Master's Degree in Humanity and I am a proud representative and alumni of the University of Houston Clear Lake. Aside from my college education, I've also acquired several on-the-job-training certifications. I am continuously learning new work skills which are available within the Texas Rehabilitation Division.

In 2014, I was blessed with the opportunity of a brief visit which left an eternal impact on my life. Though the Victim's Mediation Services, I was able to meet with my victim's mother. During our three-hour visit, she sought closure and asked many questions that only I could answer. Tearfully, she expressed how I destroyed her life and family. As a Godly woman, she found comfort in the meaning and power of mercy. Following the heart of our dialogue, she confessed to me about the intention for her visit. Looking directly into my eyes, she said, "I forgive you for your action against my son." In tears, I thanked her. Knowing that my words failed to truly express my gratitude toward her. In my last moments with her, she smiled and waved good-bye.



During the course of my life, I've gained a moral responsibility toward the productivity and growth of my community. Since then, I have created various curriculums that allocate necessary information for successful life applications. My vision is focused on the whole of humanity and not particular organizations. My efforts to help foster this mission is coordinated through personal mentorships, educational programs and positive community events.

At the age of 36, I believe God has opened my mind and vision to understand the purpose of my life. I pray that God provides me the strength, patience and compassion to fulfill my purpose and reach the destiny which awaits in the future.

Michael Tracy

60 year sentence at 17 years old

“I wish you would think about what I’ve written, I pray that you’ve obtained a better understanding of who we are, after so long behind bars, and realize we were just immature kids that made mistakes.”

"I WISH YOU WOULD"

BY MICHAEL TRACY

DEAR LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

I WISH YOU WOULD TAKE A MOMENT OF YOUR TIME TO READ THIS LETTER AND ATTAIN AN UNDERSTANDING AND PERSPECTIVE OF THE "COMPONENTS" THAT MY LIFE, FOR THE LAST 23 YEARS, CONSIST OF AND THE "CRUCIBLE" IN WHICH THE NEW MICHAEL TRACY #689505 WAS FORMED IN. THE "COMPONENTS" OF WHICH I REFERRED TO ABOVE ARE: ① THE REASON FOR MY INCARCERATION: AN AGGRAVATED ROBBERY CHARGE COMMITTED IN 1993 (OCTOBER - ONE MONTH AFTER THE 50% LAW WAS PUT INTO EFFECT) ② THE AGE THAT I WAS WHEN I COMMITTED THE OFFENSE - 17 YEARS OLD AND ③ THE AMOUNT OF TIME I WAS GIVEN FOR A CRIME IN WHICH NOBODY WAS HURT AND THE VICTIM STATED THAT I RECEIVED TOO MUCH TIME - 60 YRS. AGGRAVATED (IN WHICH I MUST DO 30 YRS. FLAT TO SEE PAROLE FOR THE FIRST TIME) VIA PRESENTENCE INVESTIGATION (P.S.I. FOR SHORT) FOR MY FIRST OFFENSE AS AN ADULT. THE "CRUCIBLE" THAT I STATED ABOVE IS A UNIT IN TDCO-ID WITH THE NICKNAME BACK IN 1996 (THE YR. I TRANSFERED THERE) "BURN IN HELL" - CLEMENS UNIT IN DRAEORIA, TX. WHICH WAS ONE OF THE WORST FARMS IN THAT ERA AND NOTORIOUS FOR VIOLENCE, MURDER, RIOTS ETC... I'VE HEARD IT SAID: "THE HOTTER THE FIRE, THE HARDER THE METAL."

WHEN A 17 YR. OLD KID IS THROWN INTO THAT SITUATION, INTO THE FIRE ON A "MAD MAX" (MAXIMUM SECURITY UNIT) OR "ROCK AND ROLL" UNIT... "SINK OR SWIM" TAKES ON A TOTALLY

NEW AND SURREAL MEANING. BY "SINKING" YOU SURRENDER TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND PARTAKE OR PARTICIPATE IN THE NEGATIVE LIFESTYLES THAT ARE PREVALENT THEREIN. BY "SWIMMING," YOU REALIZE THE INSANITY OF THE PATH YOU ON, SO YOU DO YOUR VERY BEST TO NAVIGATE AROUND THE "POTHOLES" TO ARRIVE AT THE BEST POSSIBLE DESTINATION. I ALMOST STARTED TO WRITE THAT 1998 WAS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT YEAR OF MY TRANSFORMATION, BUT IT WAS NOT... 1994, WHILE ON A TRANSFER FACILITY, I GAVE MY LIFE TO CHRIST JESUS WHILE SEEKING AN EXPLANATION OR UNDERSTANDING AS TO WHY I WAS GIVEN THE HAND THAT I WAS DEALT. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS "FIRST STEP" BARELY DAMNED ON ME IN THESE LAST THREE YEARS. 1994 WAS THE YEAR THE SEED WAS PLANTED, 1998 WAS THE YEAR THE SEED SPROUTED. I VIVIDLY REMEMBER LOOKING AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR AND NOT ONLY DISLIKING WHAT I SAW, BUT EVERYTHING ABOUT ME (JAMES CHAPTER 1). IT WAS AT THAT POINT THAT I DECIDED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. AND DURING THIS TIME OF TRANSITION TO BECOMING A GOOD MAN, I THOUGHT I WAS WALKING WITHOUT THE LORD, WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW WAS THAT THE WHOLE TIME HE WAS THERE. WHEN I MADE THAT DECISION AND STOOD FIRM ON IT THINGS BEGAN TO RADICALLY CHANGE IN MY LIFE IN A POSITIVE MANNER. MY FAMILY WAS BLESSED IN SO MANY WAYS REPEATEDLY (CHILDREN WERE BEING BORN TO MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS RIGHT AND LEFT), I WAS BEING BLESSED WITH AWESOME JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND LIVED ON GOOD TANKS / DORMS WITH POSITIVE PEOPLE.

GOD'S FAVOR WAS UPON ME AND HE BLESSED ME IN EVERY-
THING I DID... AND THIS REMAINS TRUE TO THIS DAY. EVEN
IN THIS STORM CALLED "PRISON" THAT CHURNS 24-7,
HEBREWS 13:5 IS SO TRUE: "I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU NOR
FORSAKE YOU."

EVER SINCE THAT "REFLECTIVE" REVELATION HIT ME WHILE
ASSIGNED TO THE CLEMENS UNIT, I HAVE CONTINUALLY WORKED
TO REBUILD AND BETTER MYSELF. DEGREES AND CERTIFICATES
ONLY SPEAK OF YOUR INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY AND EXPLOIT
WHICH, IN THE HANDS OF THE WICKED, MAKES FOR A SMARTER
CROOK. I FOCUSED ON CHARACTER. MY FATHER IN HEAVEN
CREATED US TO BE RIGHTEOUS, HONEST, HUMBLE, MEER
AND ABOVE ALL - LOVING AS CHRIST WAS. MY MOM AND DAD
TAUGHT ME THE SAME... I WAS JUST A SLOW LEARNER.
AT THIS POINT, AFTER BEING LOCKED UP 23 YRS. AND BEING
41 YRS. OLD, I AM STILL STRIVING TO MASTER THESE QUALITIES
IN PRISON, CLERK JOBS ARE THE BEST JOBS WITH THE MOST
RESPONSIBILITIES. I'VE HELD FOUR OF THESE POSITIONS FOR
UP TO 5 YRS. THEY INCLUDE: LIBRARY CLERK, COMMISSARY
CLERK, LAUNDRY CLERK AND MY CURRENT JOB - CHAPEL CLERK
WHICH I'VE HELD FOR 3 YRS. I'VE ALSO OBTAINED "O.J.T.'S"
(ON THE JOB TRAINING) CERTIFICATES FOR INDUSTRIAL LAUNDRY
LAUNDRY OPERATIONS FOR WASHING MACHINE, DRYER,
SEWING MACHINE AND PRESSER OPERATIONS. I USED WHAT
I LEARNED ON CLEMENS TO BECOME A MASTER PRESSER.
ON TERRELL UNIT, MY CURRENT UNIT, UPON BEING REASSIGNED

HERE IN 2009, I VIVIDLY REMEMBER CRYING OUT TO GOD BEFORE THAT ASKING GOD TO ALLOW ME TO GO SOMEWHERE WHERE I COULD PERSEVERE MY RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM AND GO TO COLLEGE. I WAS SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW SOME OF MY BROTHERS TO RAMBEY I TO ACCOMPLISH THIS, BUT I ENDED UP ON RAMBEY III INSTEAD. ALIVE WITH A DEAD CHURCH AND NO COLLEGE. FAST-FORWARD 3 OR 4 YRS., AN AWESOME NEW CHAPLAIN NAMED TOM BROWNER SHOWS UP ON THE UNIT AND EVERYTHING CHANGED. SERVICES WENT FROM 50 PARTICIPANTS TO 300+. NEXT THING YOU KNOW, BECAUSE OF MY CHARACTER, I'M BEING ASKED IF I WOULD LIKE TO WORK FOR CHAP. RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD - CHECK COLLEGE YOU ASK! THANKS TO A RECENTLY FOUNDED SEMINARY, I AM NOW WORKING TOWARDS A DEGREE IN "CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP". I DIDN'T SEE IT IN THE BEGINNING, BUT THE GOOD LORD HAD IT LAID OUT FROM THE BEGINNING. I AM NOW A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST (2 COR. 5:17).

I WISH YOU WOULD THINK ABOUT WHAT I'VE WRITTEN, I PRAY THAT YOU'VE OBTAINED A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHO WE ARE NOW, AFTER DO LONG BEHIND BARS, AND REALIZE WE WERE JUST IMMATURE KIDS THAT MADE MISTAKES. I WISH YOU WOULD GIVE THE "SECOND LOOK BILL" AND US A CHANCE AT LIFE, A CHANGE AT MY FIRST JOB, DRIVERS LICENSE, CAR, HOUSE, 1ST LOVE, WIFE KIDS, ETC. I PRAY GOD'S BLESSINGS UPON YOU AND YOURS. THANK FOR YOUR TIME.

SINCERELY,

Michael Anthony #689565

Tuan Dang

40 year sentence at 15 years old

“My largest and greatest accomplishment isn’t anything that I can get a certificate for. The maturation of a man inside of these walls can be a tough endeavor, especially for someone that was incarcerated at such a young age.”

My name is Tuan Dang, TDCS # 929007. I have been incarcerated for approximately 18 years now, and I am currently 34 years old. I was arrested on Jan. 5th, 1999, certified to stand trial as an adult 3 months later and then convicted of capital murder in March 2000. My sentence required me to finish 40 flat years before I would be eligible for parole. I ended up on the Clemens unit in Brazoria, Tx. in 2000.

The Clemens unit was filled with disgruntled youths that were trying to get through their prison sentences while engaging in gang activity and violence. I did not have the slightest clue as to what I was supposed to do with my life or my place inside of that prison complex. I spent the majority of my time reading and appealing my conviction. In 2005 the Court of Appeals overturned my conviction, and I returned to the Harris County jail in September 2006. One day later I was able to bond out of jail and go through the trial process again.

I was 15 years old when I was arrested and 23 years old when I bonded out of the county jail. There were many adult "things" that I did not know how to accomplish, ex. open a bank account, get a drivers license and pay taxes. I did manage to acquire a job at DV machine as a vice president of manufacturing, and I became an active member at the social ministry at St. Justins church. I also enrolled in Houston Community College and obtained over 30 certificates in HTML and Flash programming.

In 2007 I signed a plea to a lesser charge of murder with a sentence of 40 years. After returning to prison I enrolled and finished several programs and degrees. I am about to finish my masters degree from the University of Houston Clear Lake. I also became an accomplished artist and am currently working on publishing a book with a compilation of my works.

My largest and greatest accomplishment isn't anything that

I can get a certificate for, the maturation of a man inside of these walls can be a tough endeavor, especially for someone that was incarcerated at such a young age. When I look back at the idiotic kid that I was when I committed this crime, I realize that I was clueless to the ideas of right and wrong as well as the consequences for my actions.

For the longest time, I would try to accomplish as much as possible so that I could "make up" for my actions. I understand now that those actions will always be a part of who I am and that no matter what I do, I cannot take back what I've done. I regret my actions everyday of my life, and I can only try my best to learn from my mistakes.

In the 18 years that I have been incarcerated, I have received 2 minor infractions over the years ago. My goal is to become a productive member of society that can help troubled youths avoid this path.

When I was arrested initially, I was 5'5" tall, I ended growing in prison to 5'8". I was still going through puberty and growth spurts. Now I am an adult, a grown man that has a laundry list of accomplishments. I completely understand the severity of the crime that I committed now, but at that time I did not. I was a 9th grader that didn't think about a whole lot.

I have a family and wife that support and visit me constantly. They still have faith in me but most of all, I have confidence and faith in myself. I just hope for a chance to rejoin society again. I would like to thank you for taking the time to read my story and hopefully give you a glimpse into the life of a person that was locked away at a young age.

I would also like to thank all the people involved in helping get our stories heard, you have given us a voice that normally would not be heard. Please don't ever give up hope.

Jon Paul Marsh

70 year sentence at 16 years old

*“I am telling my story for one reason:
because I have come to fully understand
that we, as an intelligent society,
should call into question the practice of
certifying our juveniles and trying them
in adult courts.”*

*** I am not writing this on my own behalf. My situation is not unique and the problem I hope to address is a national one. I am telling my story for one reason: because I have come to fully understand that we, as an intelligent society, should call into question the practice of certifying our juveniles and trying them in adult courts.

I am 33 years old now, serving a 70 year aggravated sentence for murder. I was 16 years old at the time of the offense. I entered TDCJ the spring of 2002. Next year I will have spent half my life in prison. In this time I earned my GED, graduated a vocation and earned an associates degree. At present, I am looking forward to earning a Bachelors in Behavioral Science from the Univ. of Houston at Clearlake — In fact I am way down the list because of the length of my sentence. I continue to do what I can to prepare for the hoped-for eventuality of my release on parole.

The hard facts; there is nothing I can ever do to give back the life of my victim. I took something that cannot be returned, cannot ever be recompensed. Words fail me here. There is no way to describe the remorse in my heart. It can be debilitating, it's something people like me learn to cope with.

My family and the people who knew me growing up, and also the doctor who treated me while I was out on bond, believe that I was driven ~~to~~ temporary insane by the medication I was taking as prescribed. I was taking Paxil for depression. It is an SSRI classed drug. If you Google "SSRI violence" you will find dozens, if not hundreds, of stories

identical to mine. A nonviolent person lacking an aggressive history one day commits a violent murder. And you will notice that two types of people are more susceptible to the effects of mind-altering drugs like Paxil.

Juveniles and the elderly. Because their brains are different. Any college psychology course in the country that addresses human growth and development will tell you a juvenile's brain is developing and therefore different than an adult's. Not that a child, adolescent, or teenager, is mature or immature. No, the actual organ itself is physically different.

And of course we know this. We recognize that youth are behind us in development in the attention we pay ~~them~~ in correcting them, helping them, teaching them. We even restrict juveniles from certain activities at home and in the public arena. We protect our children in all instances. Except for one, and that is the area of Criminal law.

I was tried ~~and convicted~~ as an adult and convicted, was sentenced to 70 years aggravated. I am expecting to do 30 years in prison before I am eligible for parole. But back then my mind wasn't on parole. It was on survival.

I was assigned to the Clemens Unit in Brazoria, Tx. There I was housed with other offenders my age. I can describe the experience with one word: CHAOS. Kids were assaulted, extorted, sexually abused and preyed upon. By guards ~~and~~ ^{but} mainly by each other. The "Lord of the Flies" is what I have come to think of it as.

We were indoctrinated into violence, Forceably instructed in racism, and taught a total disdain for authority. Many of the other kids took these attitudes to the world with them. Most of them came back with new and violent changes worse than the first. Out of fear many of us learned to carry weapons. I had never carried a weapon in my life. But, after my experience on Clemens it would be years before I felt safe without one. You see, the effect that Chaos has on a young person's brain can be summarized in PTSD.

Not only was I ill from the trauma of having killed a very close friend; I was then thrown, along with the rest of us, to the sharks.

It is by the grace of God that I am who I am today. If it were not for the fervent prayer and continual, undying support of my parents and siblings this place would have very likely ruined me. And not only has God healed the trauma of the experience he has afforded me a measure of peace concerning my situation. And so I say again, it is not on my behalf that I share this. It is for the sake of our children.

Will we continue to wash our hands of things and sell our kids out to a faceless nation of ~~evil~~ criminal justice or will we seek to ~~re~~habilitate the product of our own failure?

If you are concerned about crime you should be. And also recognize that the current practice of certifying juveniles only creates a greater sickness.

I have 16 years experience in the belly of the whale.
I know criminals and the criminal mind first hand.
And I say with total conviction there exists no
crime, that if committed by a juvenile, should result
in the sentence I myself have served.

Jon Paul Marsh #1090642
Michael unit
2664 FM 2054
Tennessee Colony, Tx 75886

Thomas Vargas

Life sentence at 15 years old

*“The children are the future,
so why bury them alive?”*



"A Season of Years" by Thomas V.

From the moment my brother was murdered, deep down I knew I was alone in this world. I was only 11 yrs old. My life as a child was not normal and even though I had a roof over my head and a meal to eat... I lacked so much. Through out my childhood years, I ~~became~~ became used to the verbal, physical and even emotional abuse I endured as the youngest in my family. I was aware of the constant use of drugs and alcohol... but, to my eyes it was to have fun. It was always around... and well so was I. My brother Michael taught me so much about life. About prayer, about right and wrong. About a man, a woman, even a father. Sports was my way of being someone. I loved basketball, he taught me how to play and even improve. To me... he was my only friend, my only family. Because he was the only one to show he cared about my life. My joys, my goals, my wonders. He was my confidant.

As crazy as this may sound, he never wanted me to be like him, my other brothers and sisters or even my dad. I was different. I was to be better, wiser and smarter. Cramps and violence has always been a part of my family. Especially ~~alcoholism~~ alcoholism.

As I witnessed the most tragic thing happen to my life... my brother was gone. So was I. At the age of 11 I took up drinking hard liquor and smoking weed. Soon ~~cigarettes~~ I began to drink so much that I'd skip school just to do so somewhere else. All my dreams and goals went away slowly. It did

not help getting caught. It made matters worse for me. I was not just punished, I was beat with a belt. At the time, I could not understand why being punished had to go over board all the time. Today I know. It's the cause of anger for so many years and being drowned away by alcohol.

Life for me was hard at a very young age. I never really hung around with kids my age or done kid things. I didn't have anyone attending school activities with me or basketball or even baseball games. While everyone ran to their moms and dads after we won games, I stood there... alone and embarrassed. I began to want to spend more time and days away from my home. Some where, where I could feel that same love in their eyes.

I began to run away to the streets. Repeating the things I grew up seeing. Stealing and selling it. Using the money to buy drugs and even sell them. To make more money! So I never have to go back home. I was so lost with out love, bouncing from one place to another. No longer in school. Some times I would find myself at night, cold in the rain, in tears wishing my life would end. I could not go home to a father who'd only beat me for every thing I done or even didn't do... but he thinks I did. I had no one else to run to anymore. So I'd just sit there and cry till I became... desensitized.

By the time I turned 15 yrs old, out of school, in a relationship with a girl who may be pregnant with my child, I didn't know what else to do. I did

what I been doing. This time, my life would change. So would others. Forever. ~~Over~~

I was intoxicated very heavily, from what was supposed to just be a fun relaxing time with "family". The night had more to tell. Anger! Greed! Fear! Panic! Till this day I can not understand why my actions had to be those ways. Yet, I never gave up trying to learn, why?

~~Today~~ I committed one of the most despicable degrading acts. A life was taken. At the time I did not realize what was happening. As I began to sober up the next day. It all set in. I kept replaying over and over what took place. I was afraid! I acted out of fear and greed. Being used to this kind of violence around me, I was still afraid. I was still a kid. Had I not been so intoxicated, things would have never been those ways at all. I was being held for homicide. Being taken advantage of my rights, by law, I was being interrogated by detectives, till I was coerced into believing they would help me if I told the truth. I looked to my father for guidance just this one time, yet I was denied... again, I was alone and afraid! I was being transferred to adult court, having to understand the system, alone. As I sat there, in another environment, 16 yrs old... facing life in prison, many thoughts of tempting my own life came. Instead... These words echoed in my head "The truth shall set you free." I began to read the bible over and over, finding a

sense of love and guidance for once. To obtain forgiveness I gave my life to God. I was going through trial and all I wanted to do was take the stand and answer every question this family had to ask. I just wanted to find peace. My lawyer would not let me. All I wanted was forgiveness for what I done and how I grew up. On that day that I was convicted, I was sentenced to life in prison. I was only 16~~000~~.

I shed my last grieving tear for my brother, my joys and goals, my ~~as~~ need for love and comfort. Even the victims and the family. As I walked out that court room... I left everything there. I could not feel any more. Empty inside. None of my family was there in that court room, I was sure ~~to~~ at that moment, I was alone.

Through out the days awaiting transfer, I opened up more and more to Christianity. That was my refuge. I had many conversations with God. I seeked every answer in that message I recieved. I was finally transferred to a prison, Clemens Unit. A place where many juveniles like myself were as well. Victims as well to this justice system. Alone... in yet another kind of horror. Most every one there, under the age of 18 yrs, all surrounded by gangs and even more violence and drugs and rage. Sure, there were times one had to fight for survival... some people more times than others. It took so much for me to be optimistic and not lose faith. Not lose hope that I will have a chance to be a better person... a chance to live a life.

I got into school and anger management classes. I received my G.E.D on the first try and accomplished anger management. I then was placed in a cognitive intervention program. What I discovered in that class was why my destruction came at an early age. There was so much I lacked as a child. From that moment, I knew, it was my passion to, help those who gone through what I have or are heading that way, to understand these things and that they can be someone. They can reach their potential.

For many of us, it seems as though we will never get the chance to live. I'm 30 yrs old now, it's been 15 yrs. since I changed. I didn't know what it was like to be a kid. I did not let that remain. I read up on many parenting books and even life skills. The book of proverbs has gave me so much guidance in life. I may not have experienced things as others have, but the knowledge I have gained and the Gifts God has given me, I can place myself in others shoes to better understand them. I was given a vision in 2009, that there would be forgiveness, the law would change for those of us who were juveniles and received maximum penalties, so that we could show the world the hope that kept us from being institutionalized so we could have a chance to make a better difference in lives. "The children are the future." So why bury them alive? Cause that's how it feels. Dying to live. My God has shown me this vision, that I will also receive a wife and kids.

So far, through the grace of God, 2015 there was a woman brought to me and three precious kids, my wife and step-kids who I love dearly. A family of God. We work every day and keep faith that our constitution would be recognized soon. At what point do you recognize positive change? At what point do you recognize forgiveness? At what point do you finally realize the culpability of a child to change? How long must a child sit in adult facilities, thinking they will never get the chance to live life as it was promised... if they change and become positive adults that are responsible, civilized and full of integrity? Most of us been simply just wanting to be loved, noticed of accomplishments and belong from the very beginning. How much research is needed to prove the likelihood of a child changing after so many years? Every breath I take, will be to serve God. I believe, my purpose was to share my story for those who wanted to be heard, those who are better persons today, for those who sit here in faith, waiting for one chance to utilize every great skill learned, to raise a family and be great fathers/mothers, husbands/wives, neighbors and co workers. To just be a productive member of society and vessel of God. What then is change, if the chance is not there to be shown? Our lives were lost as well and the life in prison is just another way of death... 40yrs for parole... we'd be yet alone, again. Thank you for listening. God Bless