

TESTIMONY OF ALEXIS STURDY

Judiciary Committee

March 23, 2012

H.B. 5546, An Act Concerning Sentence Modification of Juveniles

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My name is Lexi Sturdy and I am the co-founder and Director of the Center for Prison Education at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. The Center is an initiative of Wesleyan University in partnership with the Department of Corrections' Unified School District #1. Our main operation is a college program at Cheshire C.I. where we have enrolled thirty-six men as Wesleyan Undergraduates over the past three years. In my role, I work closely with the individual students through the academic experience at Cheshire and recently, I have taken on the role of mentoring our students who are re-entering society. We help our students navigate the tricky world of re-entry: aid them in finding meaningful employment, and advise them on the college application process. Our first student was released in October and has successfully transferred his Wesleyan credits and is currently a sophomore at the University of Connecticut.

Our program aims to democratize access to educational opportunities for those who have been systematically denied access. The population we work with at Cheshire (which mirrors the larger prison system and is greatly impacted by the bill we are discussing today) come from disproportionately low-income communities and communities of color. We hope, through our program, the men and women we work with will have a significant opportunity to put their lives back on track. An education in prison can offer them better prospects for their future by improving

their writing, verbal articulation, and critical analysis, but also by building their self-esteem and identity through high expectations and individualized attention.

Our country, and specifically the State of Connecticut, has invested tremendous amounts of money and energy on incarceration in the past few decades, without many significant changes to public safety or recidivism. What I have witnessed while working with the Department of Corrections is that a change in the nature of the investment in an incarcerated individual can have a profoundly different result.

Last week in the American Literature class that is being offered at Cheshire, the men discussed Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Sorry to spoil the novel if you haven't read it, but to simplify the plot: a wealthy New Orleans wife and mother is under-stimulated by her life. She takes up with a younger man, has an awakening that she could never lead the lifestyle she would like and in the last passage she walks in to the ocean to end her life. Naturally, this is not a book that has made its way through Cheshire, but nonetheless the students led a wonderful conversation on the imagery and motifs throughout the novel. When talking about Edna's character, one of the students raised his hand and announced to the class, I've had an awakening: my mother was just like Edna. She abandoned my siblings and I when I was 8, I've always resented her for it, but I now realize, through Edna, that she needed to leave to live her own life, the life she wanted. One of the other men in the class stood up, went over, and embraced his fellow classmate. This doesn't happen everyday on Wesleyan's main campus but in what has become a weekly occurrence in the classrooms at Cheshire, the student shared his own life experience

and commented, "I can't believe I hadn't read this until now—I love this book, it has taught me so much about myself and has made me less angry." It is moments like this that I have the most wonderful job in the world, I get to see the transformative power of a liberal arts education, what Wesleyan strives to do on campus.

Our men range in age from 20-57. Their sentences range from 7 to 120 years. The men involved in our program, and many more who applied but did not gain admission, have shown great maturity and drive by enrolling as college students. Four of the highest GPAs in our program, and the natural leaders and role models for men throughout the prison, were convicted as juveniles and would be greatly impacted by this conversation. These men are dedicated students with a passion for learning and for giving back to their communities.

Last night, we had a fundraising event for the program in New York City. Our donors are so energized by the successful news of our released students and their drive to continue on this inspiring path. So am I. But at the same time it saddens me to know how much more the men in our program can give, if they had the chance. This bill has the opportunity to start a much-needed conversation. I hope you will consider providing a mechanism for a "second look" at the long sentences that have been imposed on the men in my program (selfishly), and many women and men like them who were convicted as juveniles. It gives me hope that after serving some time, they would potentially prove their maturity and return home to contribute in a meaningful way to society, their community, and their families. In my opinion, this bill has the opportunity to champion meaningful rehabilitation. Thank you for your time.