

Written Testimony of Doug Hood
Sentencing for Juveniles

Judiciary Committee
March 23, 2012

H.B. No. 5546, An Act Concerning Sentence Modification for Juveniles

Dear Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Doug Hood. I am a physician assistant, with 25 years experience in a medical center in neurology.

A year ago I was gravely ill. Wally Lamb kindly came to my house to visit. He left a sheet of paper that would greatly affect me. It was a volunteer application to York, the women's prison. I ignored it. Really, who would want to meet prisoners? He later called to remind me. I've dealt with some tough patients and have been to pretty bad areas in the world, but I had never met a prisoner.

I timidly joined his writing class.

The group, led by Wally, Careen, and Susan, has about 15 women. Most were one-time violent offenders. Though not juveniles, many were young when arrested. Half are sentenced for 25 years or more. After our total of 29 years there and, say, 4000 personal stories—we know them well.

After we sign in and make our way through the steel doors and past the razor wire we enter the classroom and are greeted as if in a college seminar. Wally calls for readers and hands go up. Based on pure quality you can hardly tell who in our class was in the Latinas, or who quit sixth grade, who worked in the Upper East Side, who was an abandoned runaway child, or which one finished an Ivy League college. Mary describes her job jaunt, from owning Reptilemania to running numbers. Another reads a magical children's story from Korea. Jadi describes a woman cowering under her boyfriend's pistol. You realize almost all are in York because of once being trapped, coerced, or provoked. Heather admitted, "Arrest was my only escape. I was an outmate before becoming an inmate." Tracy, imprisoned as a teen, now near forty, said, "I don't even know that girl that did my crime."

But all are optimistic. Thirty more years to go of painting walls and dishing out slop, of strip searches and shakedowns, of counting pennies for commissary, and they're hopeful? They've stopped wallowing in pity and blame. In a system that penalizes physical hugging, they do it metaphysically. What an enduring race we are. They burn with desire, for one chance in life. Not one more, because for many they never got that first one.

The only bitterness I can find in the room is mine. As an American I want to brag that our prison system is the best in the world, that understands a young person should be fixed and not thrown away. I am bitter because it ranks last in the world and these women who in our eyes have already self-rehabbed, will be cheated. Many will finally walk out, a crooked back elderly with a satchel and a little cash, a ghostly memory of who she used to be, to start a new life. They are told their debt is finally paid.