

Testimony of Greta Blanchard

In support of HB 5221

Judiciary Committee

March 3, 2014

Hello, my name is Greta Blanchard. I am a resident of Unionville and I am here in support of HB 5221.

I have with me today, a letter written by Michael Spyke, a 32 year old who was incarcerated (at 16) and tried as an adult (at 17). He states in his letter that he flunked 7th grade and was passed on to the next grade until he eventually dropped out of school. He had no advocate or positive direction in his life at that time. I believe you will find his letter compelling as you read his story.

I became aware of Michael because I was an alternate juror at his hearing. I was not part of the deliberation therefore was not called upon to give my opinion concerning his case. When I found out that he was convicted on 3 of 4 counts, I was shocked. I called the courthouse to get his sentencing date. I went to his sentencing and was deeply troubled when learning of the length of his sentence—50 years with no chance of parole. It was then that I decided to see if I could write him to encourage him. We have been writing ever since – and my husband and I routinely visit him as well as keep in contact with his mother. Michael has seen positive personal developments during his incarceration, however he wouldn't wish being a teenager in a prison with older men on anyone...he makes that clear in his letter. He has been incarcerated for more than 15 years. He has changed, for instance while in prison he got his GED, multiple certificates for skilled services and is presently finishing up his certification as a personal trainer. As I've gotten to know him over the years I see so much potential, desire to do better and do right. I feel that the length of his incarceration is disproportionate to what he did as someone not fully emotionally and cognitively developed as a teenager.

I am a mother, a teacher, and a private citizen who though not a family member is an impassioned advocate for Michael Spyke and others like him who have so much to give if allowed to take this next positive step in their lifelong rehabilitation. I strongly encourage you to read his letter as you consider this bill and will let Michael's last statement in his letter say it best, "One thing I will keep on doing is having faith and applying myself every day to be a better man."

Thank you,

Greta Blanchard

Unionville, CT

September, 2012

To Whom it May Concern,

Since the age of 16 I've been incarcerated, for 14 ½ years, almost half of my life. From the beginning, I was not put around juveniles my own age. I was placed around grown adult men, old enough to be my father or grandfather. A juvenile placed in a situation like that wasn't unusual back then. The prison authorities were both uninterested and unable to help me. It wasn't pretty.

So, when reality hit and I realized this is where I'm gonna be, I realized that no one could save me but myself. In order to do that I needed to find out who I am and what I wanted to be, what type of man I should be and what I could do to become the best of which I was capable of being. I also understood that what had happened to me had also happened to countless other minority kids and it would happen to many more until a change occurred.

I read somewhere that it is easier to do bad than it is to do good. That's one of the truest statements I have ever read. My next statement I would never think I would say, but I think coming to jail saved my life in more ways than one. The potential I discovered I have, I don't think I would have ever discovered if I had been home. Now don't get me wrong, there hasn't been one night since I've been in here that I haven't prayed for Malik's mother to get through the loss of her child, even my mother to get through the loss of her child either. Because even though she could come visit, it still is not the same for her.

Coming in here at a young age was the hardest, most painful experience I ever have been through. But, I felt I was strong enough to get through it. I would never want to see any kid go through or see what I've seen behind these walls. I've learned that applying yourself and having the determination and patience is the key in accomplishing anything you want to do.

The first year incarcerated, I obtained my GED on the second try. The first try I failed by 4 points, the second try I passed by over 5 or 6 points. I studied real hard the second time, focused on my weak points and accomplished what I set out to do. Obtaining my GED was a big accomplishment in my eyes. Since back when I can remember from elementary through middle school, I didn't have to try hard to get passed through the next grade, because they always passed you by exception back then. I even remember failing the 7th grade and thinking, *wow, I messed up big, how am I gonna fix that.* But, it just so happened that when the first day of school came around, I was put back in class with my old classmates and was told if I could maintain a C- average I could graduate with my class. I don't even remember working hard that year. I was just happy to be around my old classmates and they still let me graduate – by exception.

The hardest I ever fought to apply myself to be somebody is when I came to be behind these walls. It's sad that I had to come into this type of environment to learn for myself that I had the potential to do something with my life. I've learned a lot and accomplished a lot in

here. I've taken some vocational educational courses such as Bicycle/Wheelchair Repair, Commercial Cleaning, Time Life Management and a Business Education Class that consisted of 11 courses you needed to take in order to pass. The educational classes in the prisons are very limited and with long waiting lists. There have been other studies that I have been interested in that have not been available in here. I have ordered books from a bookstore and been self taught. Some of the books I've studied are mainly business books, dealing with import/export, real estate investing, and starting your own personal training business. The most recent book I'm studying is foreign currency trading.

Sometimes it gets frustrating because I'm dealing with a lot of negativity in here. So, it gets hard to stay focused and stay out of trouble. Then I ask myself sometimes, *what am I doing all this studying for when I will never be able to use it? I don't have parole and my discharge date is when I'm in my 60's.* But then I brush it off and put it in God's hands and have faith that something will give. I have been blessed with some new friends turned family that God has brought into my life, such as Larry, Greta and Mike. Plus, my mother, who stood by me through all of this when I knew it was harder for her than it has been for me being in here. I just hope I get the opportunity to show her that I'm so much better than this and give her something to be proud of.

Thank you just for reading this. One thing I will keep on doing is having faith and applying myself every day to be a better man.

Thank you for your time,

Michael Spyke

Submitted by Greta Blanchard on behalf of Michael Spyke (who has given his permission)