

I'm Going to Move Forward
Stories of Change from Men
Imprisoned as Children in Connecticut

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Children in Connecticut**

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INTRODUCTION

Connecticut treats children charged with certain serious crimes as adults. The state transfers these children to adult courts and, if it finds them guilty, often sentences them to prison terms of several decades. For this report, we have interviewed and corresponded with some of these people whom the state tried as adults and sentenced to 20, 30, 40, or more years in prison for crimes that occurred when they were children. In the pages that follow, these men – many of whom have now spent nearly half their lives in prison – share their mistakes, challenges, achievements, fears, and dreams. They recount their experiences growing up in prison and the decisions they made to change: how they learned to tell right from wrong; how they reckoned with the terrible pain they caused; how they learned to think for themselves and to care for others. They share their hopes for the future: how they want to give back to their communities and help keep other young people from making the same mistakes; how they yearn to be good fathers and supportive husbands.

As the law stands now, these individuals will have to wait for many more decades for the opportunity to show that they have changed and that they are ready to rejoin society. Currently, Connecticut does not allow parole for many of the crimes for which these individuals have been convicted. In other cases, the state does not permit parole hearings until an individual has served 85% of his sentence. For a 16-year-old who is given a 50-year sentence without parole, it means that he will not see the outside of a prison until he is 66, no matter how well he does inside. The crimes for which these people were convicted as children are serious – they include murder and manslaughter. Our report does not seek to diminish the seriousness of these crimes and the suffering they have caused families and communities. However, common sense, as well as documented developments in brain science, affirms

that children do not have the same judgment and impulse control as adults and often do not understand the consequences of their actions. As the following pages illustrate, children also have enormous capacity for growth.

The Connecticut legislature is considering two bills that recognize that children are different from adults and must be treated differently in the criminal justice system. The bills would not immediately release anyone but would give the opportunity for a second look at long sentences. The first bill, House Bill 6581, provides for parole hearings for people who were sentenced to ten or more years for crimes that occurred when they were children. To be eligible, an individual must have served at least half of his sentence or 10 years, whichever is longer. If he has a 60-year or longer sentence, he must have served at least 30 years. The second bill, Senate Bill 1062, eliminates mandatory life-without-parole sentences for children and provides that judges must consider youth and other related factors in sentencing children who are transferred to adult court. These bills could change the lives of more than 200 individuals currently in prison. Neither of the bills would provide for automatic release; rather, they would guarantee an opportunity for a parole hearing (or, in the case of Senate Bill 1062, a resentencing hearing) where each person would be evaluated individually.

The Connecticut legislature should pass House Bill 6581 and Senate Bill 1062. The state should recognize, as the U.S. Supreme Court has, that children have both diminished culpability and a greater capacity for change than do adults. Connecticut's children deserve a second chance.

METHODOLOGY

This report grows out of a collaboration between the Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School and the Quinnipiac University School of Law Civil Justice Clinic. The two clinics wrote a report, *Youth Matters: A Second Look for Connecticut's Children Serving Long Sentences in Prison*, detailing the causes and consequences of children going through the justice system and growing up in prison. The report included information on the history of sentencing laws in Connecticut, an analysis of recent Supreme Court decisions, a description of international human rights standards, and an overview of the relevant brain science.

In drafting the report, the clinics drew upon the insights of individuals serving these long sentences, through interviews, letters, and public testimony before the Connecticut Sentencing Commission. The report included pieces of the interviews, letters, and testimony, but we wanted to be able to tell more of these individuals' stories as they reflected on their past, present, and hopes for the future.

This second report focuses on the stories of ten young men, with whom the authors corresponded and met over the course of the past year. The men gave their informed consent to include their stories in the report, and they, along with their legal counsel, were consulted during the report's production. The following accounts are drawn from the men's interviews and letters. The report indicates where excerpts are taken from letters. All other narratives are taken from interviews. We have made only minor editorial changes but changed names and places completely in order to protect people's privacy. The individuals presented here are not necessarily representative of every person serving these sentences. However, they provide a glimpse at young people's potential for

significant change while in prison. They have hopes for the future. They have plans to give back to their communities and support their families. These are their words and their stories.

STORIES OF CHANGE
AND
HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

MATTHEW

Matthew is serving a 40-year sentence for conspiracy to commit murder and assault. He was arrested when he was 16 years old.

Matthew has a daughter who was born right after he was sent to prison. She is now 11 years old. He talks about his hopes for her future, what it was like for him growing up, how he has changed, and what he dreams of doing when he gets out of prison.

I don't want my daughter to feel how I felt towards my parents. I want her to say "Daddy." I dream about moments like that. I tell her mother, "You need to see what her interests are. See what programs are available for her. She likes writing. See if there are writing programs for her. She needs to broaden her horizons." I don't want her to be a victim of her environment. I sent her two composition books, two pencils, two erasers. I told her to send me a story. She said, "Alright, Daddy." Just to hear that makes me feel good. I want to encourage her. If I told my mom, I like to run, and she said run track, I would have done it in a minute.

I lived with my mom when I was really little, and then I started going back and forth between my mom and my grandmother. I lived with my grandmother until I was ten. I felt safe there because I didn't have to worry if my mom's boyfriend would come over and start a fight or if the lights would go off. I knew I'd have a bath at the end of the day. But when I was ten, my grandmother had a heart attack. She had to take care of my cousin who had Down's Syndrome, and she couldn't take care of me and my little brother anymore. I didn't want to leave. At my mom's house, it was every man for himself. At the time, I felt like I was being thrown to the wolves. Now I understand that my grandmother was sick and that she had to take care of my cousin.

I didn't really know my mom growing up. Once, when my brother and I were very young and living with my grandmother, we

made a wish on a wishbone that our mother would come to see us. She actually came. One day she showed up outside the house. We told our grandmother that some lady was at the fence. She told us that was our mother.

When I went back to live with my mom, I felt out of place. I had two siblings who had lived with her their whole lives. They had a bond with her. My siblings would tell our mom they loved her, but I felt like a stranger. I felt as though I had to ask permission to even get something from the fridge when my siblings never did. The kids in the neighborhood didn't know who I was. They'd tell my brother and sister that I must be adopted. Growing up, that weighs a lot on your mind.

My mom kicked me out when I was fifteen. I didn't know where to go. I didn't know where I was going to work. I didn't feel like I could ask her for help. I had an uncle who let me sleep on his floor, but I felt like a burden because he has kids himself. So I started bouncing all over. If I had money, I'd get a cheap hotel room. Then I met my daughter's mom, and she invited me to stay with her. I have regrets. I wonder, maybe if I didn't do this or that, maybe I wouldn't be in here. Now, I think maybe I needed to travel down this path.

When I was arrested, I asked my mom to come with me to the police station, but she told me I didn't have anything to worry about. I didn't have my mom or dad with me when I was being questioned. I was alone. I was vulnerable. I was just looking for a saving grace. I was mad at my mom at the time for not coming with me. Now I understand where she was coming from. She was naïve like I was. It's selfish if I don't understand what the other person is going through.

But I wasn't some hardened guy on the street. I never had anybody tell me that the whole arrest and trial process was going to be an emotional thing to go through. I was scared and vulnerable. I thought that the lawyer would have my best interests in mind, but, instead, I felt like just another docket number that he got out of the way.

I only met with him once before I was sentenced. When we were at the courthouse for my sentencing, I was frozen and numb and exhausted. The words that everyone was saying weren't penetrating. The judge and the prosecutor and my lawyer were using all these confusing words. I emotionally shut down. I started hyperventilating. I got lightheaded and started shaking. But my lawyer pretended he didn't see what was happening. He told me to "go plead guilty and you'll get it over with."

My lawyer told me I would get 15-20 years if I pled guilty. So when I was sent to prison, I thought I was doing 20 years. Six years passed before I wrote to find out what my actual sentence was. Only then did I realize I had 40 years. I felt crazy, but I didn't want to say anything, because I felt stupid, like I should have known this before.

When I first came to prison, it was scary. I felt lost. I was homesick. I tried to numb myself. I got into a fight early on. This was my only ticket in the entire time since I've been here — I haven't gotten a ticket¹ in 10 years. I was put in segregation² for fighting. There was a guy in here with me who was a little older than me. He told me to be myself, go to school, pick up a trade. He encouraged me to get my high school diploma. I got my G.E.D.³ after that. It helped having someone to encourage me. It boosted my confidence.

I've done the G.E.D. program, the parenting class, Beyond Fear⁴, Anger Management, Small Engine Technology. For two years, I worked in the license plate department. I worked in the metal shop. I worked in laundry. You need to be ticket-free to get all these jobs. You need to know how to talk to people and respect the individuals you work with. Now I work Monday through Friday, 6 hours a day. I'm trying to better myself. I surround myself with positive individuals. Several years ago, I started

¹ Tickets are given for disciplinary infractions in prison.

² Segregation is solitary confinement.

³ General Educational Development test. The G.E.D. test certifies that the taker has high-school level academic skills.

⁴ Beyond Fear is an HIV-education program.

the Lifers Group with a few other individuals after one of the counselors gave us the idea. He told us to talk, to interact. He said this is a long journey. That's when I realized that it matters to people what I have to say.

The goal of our Lifers Group is to encourage self-improvement through civic and social activities that promote a healthy community inside and outside the facility. We want to encourage individuals in the prison to realize more of their own humanity and encourage those in the communities to see positive and redeemable qualities in incarcerated individuals. We work on our coping skills. We also do charity projects. Our first charity project was to donate bricks for a park in a nearby town. We did a fundraiser after Hurricane Katrina. We talk to college kids and suburban kids. We really want to talk to inner city kids. I think we could help them most. We meet every week. We all come together with ideas of what we'd like to do next and what charity we'd like to donate to. I'd donate to St. Jude's Children Hospital if I could choose on my own, but we need to decide as a group.

Since I got my G.E.D. and since I started doing the Lifer Group, I'm more outgoing. I was introverted before. I would never have opened up, shared my story. With time, I got confident. After I got my G.E.D., I said to myself, "I actually did it. I didn't get discouraged. I accomplished something." It gave me confidence to do more things. Now I can force myself out of my comfort zone. I can think for myself. I don't care what people think of me. I pick and choose my friends, and I don't feel obligated. I got something positive out of all this. I can say who I am now. I can tell you to call me by my name. I'm comfortable saying that's who I am. I'm not my environment.

I dream of getting out of here one day. I know I'm not going to do the whole 40 years, that I could be given a chance to get out sooner. I think I might like to be a fitness instructor when I get out. I work out in the gym, and I show other guys how to use the equipment and do

different exercises. Another guy once told me I'm a good instructor. I've started taking the course to be a fitness instructor through the Stratford Institute. I'd also like to take classes through Wesleyan University. But it's hard because you have to get up early, and I want to be by the phone so I can catch my mom or my sister. I send money home so they can call. I need to be able to work so I can send the \$25— or \$50 on a good month— so they can call.

If I got out, I would talk to my daughter. I would try to create a bond with her. It will take time, but we'll get there. I think about putting my daughter in a good school and helping her mother out. I want to remain friends with her mother. When I get out, I want to get a job and help her mother go to school. If I wasn't in here, I would never have thought about finding a job to help out my daughter's mother, but now I understand that if she's doing good, my daughter is doing good. I want what's best for my daughter.

I send my daughter envelopes so she can write to me. I send a card every month to say "I'm thinking of you" or "I love you." I want her to know that she can ask me anything. Parenting doesn't stop at 18. If my daughter is 35 or 50 and she says she needs me, I'm going to say, "Just say it." I want to be a real father to my daughter. I want to be there for her.

YAKIL

Yakil is serving a 30-year sentence for murder. He was arrested when he was 15 years old.

The following excerpt is from Yakil's letter.

As of today, I have reassessed my behavior and my actions to gain a better perspective of myself. I have determined what caused me to make such a mistake, and a life changing mistake at that, which resulted in the loss of a life, and myself being sentenced to 30 years in prison. Had I known that the ramification of my careless action back then would be the loss of a life and me being behind bars, then none of us would be in this position today. And even more importantly, the victim would still be alive.

Today, I am a responsible man that has grown tremendously over the years, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I recognize my own responsibility in what led up to me making such a horrible mistake that day. Today I can honestly say that I do not behave good for the sake of fear of the consequences alone, but rather due to the fact that I know morally what is expected of me.

Furthermore, I truly and sincerely feel that I have learned many things to help me become a responsible member of society. And not just because I have been ticket free for twelve years, but more so because I truly desire to live a lawful life. Instead of wasting my time behind these walls, I currently have assisted in successfully putting together two programs within the D.O.C.⁵ They both are about identifying and then changing criminal thinking.

In addition, I have taken full advantage of every helpful class and program to help better myself. My odyssey of many years confined

⁵ Department of Correction.

behind these prison walls has humbled me, yes. However, it has also taught me the importance of what an education can provide. And that's why I received my G.E.D. Prior to coming to prison my reading level was that of a third grader. So, understanding what an education can provide, I didn't stop with just a G.E.D. Today, I have a trade as a welder.

I speak to high school kids twice a month on various topics. Topics that I stress with emphasis are the importance of an education, the power of decision making, and the importance of positive and influential role models and friends. Ultimately, my plan is to become a counselor to help others, in particular young people who are thinking and acting like I used to think and act.

I'm also a facilitator in an alternatives-to-violence group. I'm currently a C.N.A.⁶ worker in the prison hospital, helping those who are incapable of helping themselves to do the very basic necessities. And in my personal life, I am happily engaged to be married to a successful, strong, wonderful, intelligent and positive woman who has influenced my life for the better in so many ways. Basically all of what I currently have in my life today, I truly cherish and value with great pride, for the love and constant support is all I have ever needed to grow and make something good with my life, as I am doing today.

I live each day with the knowledge of what I have done, and I wish so bad that there was a way to change that terrible day. However, that reality is impossible. If there's one thing I do know, and can do something about, it's the fact that I can change the future as it pertains to myself. Furthermore, I know that I owe way more than this 30 year sentence, in terms of me actually giving back.

In closing, receiving this opportunity would not only mean the world to my family and me, because they would be able to trust and

⁶ Certified Nursing Assistant. A nursing assistant, under the supervision of a nurse or other health care professional, provides assistance to individuals in need of health care.

depend on me to be responsible, but it will also allow me to contribute to society and be an asset, as opposed to me being a liability. For I plan to work just as hard as I have in here out there in society, if I am given this opportunity. I sincerely have learned a great deal from this experience, for in life the only inevitable thing is change.

I will never forget that moment at my sentencing when my elderly foster mother, whose heart was breaking in a million pieces as she watched her son be sent away and sentenced to 30 years in prison, broke down and never recovered in that moment. So I vowed from that moment that I would come out of this situation a better person.

DAVID

David is serving a 50-year sentence for manslaughter. He was arrested when he was 17 years old.

The following excerpt is from David's letter.

Despite all the hardship I endured as a child, I don't blame no one or make any excuses for my unfortunate situation. Instead, I strive to be a better human being and soak up as many educational and work skills as possible to prepare myself for when freedom knocks. I have:

- 1) *Been a tutor in the school*
- 2) *Earned my G.E.D. Diploma*
- 3) *Earned my Psychology/ Social Work Diploma - which I paid for myself with the money I earned working in the prison industry*
- 4) *Received a Certificate of Achievement in Commercial Cleaning*
- 5) *Received a Completion Certificate, Department of Labor in Recognition of 2,000 hours of Apprenticeship Training Program in the trade of Commercial Cleaning signed by the Commissioner of Labor and then Governor Rowland*
- 6) *Received a Tier-2 Substance Abuse Certificate*
- 7) *Received a Beyond Fear Program⁷ Certificate*
- 8) *Received a Criminon Program Certificate*
- 9) *Finished the Alternatives to Violence Program*
- 10) *Finished the Embracing Fatherhood Program*
- 11) *Earned credits from Asnuntuck Community College in Self & Others⁸*
- 12) *Worked in the prison industry for nine years where I learned the skillful art of wood and metal finishing. I have a small portfolio*

⁷ Criminon is a program that addresses the causes of criminality and focuses on rehabilitation.

⁸ *Self and Others* is an Asnuntuck Community College course that explores the dynamics of diversity and the meaning of inequality.

of some work I've done in the industry. Being the head man, I taught others as well.

- 13) *What I am most proud of is my accomplishment in penning several novels and having one published.*

These are my accomplishments so far.

These walls offer an inmate nothing to better himself. One has to go beyond the walls of confinement to better himself. My true sense of self is represented by strong humility, kindness, and the desire to do the right thing. Every day I walk through these intense, hostile prison walls, my values are put to the test, because the same people I once hung around, and the same things I once thought nothing was wrong with still go on in here. But because I've changed, so have the individuals I've chosen to socialize with. It starts here, right now

ELIJAH

Elijah is serving a 40-year sentence for murder. He was arrested when he was 16 years old.

Elijah would like to become a nurse's assistant because he wants to be able to help people. He reflects on when he first realized he enjoyed helping others, about growing up and overcoming obstacles, and about how he has matured since he went to prison.

When I was in my early teens, I went to this middle school in New Haven. I worked with the handicapped kids there. I wasn't a volunteer or anything, I would just help out when I was in school. I helped them go from class to class, helped them get on the bus, helped feed them at chow⁹. I liked helping them, even when they pinched me or scratched me. It made me feel good to help them.

I was moved around a lot when I was younger, but when I was very little I lived with my Mom and Dad. When I was 8 years old, the state took me and my brothers away from home because they were concerned about abuse against one of my brothers. My Mom whooped my little brother, and he went to school with welts, so they took us away. I didn't have any choice, really. I was placed at a school a little farther from home. It was a residential school. I actually really enjoyed it. I enjoyed learning. I learned a lot there. I learned to read, and I realized that I wanted to learn about everything. I started playing basketball and soccer and learning Spanish.

When I was 12 years old, the social workers decided I should be living with a family, so they sent me to a foster family. Some of the staff at the school wanted to adopt me, and I would have preferred that. I used to spend holidays with the staff, especially one young couple. They bought me a dog that I used to play with on the weekends, and they would take

⁹ "Chow" refers to mealtimes.

me on weekend trips with them. But I didn't get a choice, and I was sent to live with some family I didn't know.

The family that the social workers sent me to live with was fine. They treated me fine. But I figured that if I wasn't living at the school I loved, I wanted to be at home. So I ran away—I hate that term, but that's what I did—and went back home. I took a cab there and surprised everyone. But the state let me stay, and I lived at my grandmother's house.

I liked living with my grandmother. She and I would sit down together after school and watch her soap operas. We would race to do crossword puzzles together and see who could finish faster. We would go shopping together, and I would help her do her errands. I would help my father in his restaurant. I went back to my sports. I got decent grades.

Then, when I was 15, my girlfriend got pregnant with my son. I started hustling to pick up more money. I knew that my mom wasn't going to raise our son, and neither was my girlfriend's mom. I needed to make money to support my kid. I got in trouble for selling weed. I was sent to a juvenile detention facility and then got sent to a group home. I was pulled away from my family. I wanted to be back home. I had a kid on the way. So I ran away and went back home. But when you're 16, not many places will hire you. I worked at a couple of fast food places, and I was cutting hair too. But the money from drugs is better than all of that combined. And thinking about the consequences of selling versus working never even crossed my mind. I didn't want selling drugs to be my lifestyle. It just felt like something I had to do to make ends meet.

When I was younger, the adults in my family would tell me not to do certain things, not to get in trouble, but then they'd be getting into trouble themselves. On my Mom's side of the family, everyone was in and out of jail. Then I was arrested, too.

The lawyer that was first on my case was pulled off early on. Another lady was assigned to my case who had never worked on a

murder case before. The first time I met her, before she told me her name, she said, "I have an offer for you." And I said, "Are you telling me I'm supposed to take it?" And she said, "Yes, I have no defense for you." I felt like I had no choice. I only met with this lawyer twice. I pled guilty, but I didn't know anything about anything.

When I came into the county jail, I was frustrated. I was worried about when or if I'd be going home. I didn't know the amount of time I would have to serve. In here, they told me, murder is 100%, no good time.¹⁰ Forty years is a long time. My daughter wasn't even born when I was arrested. She wasn't even a year old when I was sentenced. My son was just a couple of years old. I knew I'd never see them grow up. I used to spend a lot of time with my grandmother, and I knew it bothered her to see me locked up. All these things were running through my mind.

I started feeling like I didn't care, like I could do whatever I wanted because this was going to be my home for 40 years. There was no thought process at all. Back then, they didn't separate the boys from the adults. The 16- and 17-year-olds were thrown in with grown men from the start. You had to adjust very quickly. Four days in, I was fighting to defend myself from the older guys. I figured that I was going to be in prison for a long time. I was thinking I was a tough guy. I was a wild child back then. I thought I had to fight. I thought I had to make my presence known. I ended up at Northern¹¹ for a while.

Thank God for growth. If you choose to grow, you can help yourself. That's what I chose to do. Back when I first came to prison, I would just bark at people if they made me angry, but now I can make my point as a man. I can say, "I don't appreciate this or that." The impulses at 16 and 17 were a lot quicker. Now there's a thought process. I can say to myself, do I want to get my mail, watch my TV, read my books, get my commissary, or do I want to go in the box or punch him out and go to

¹⁰ "Good time" refers to a program that allows inmates to be eligible for early release based on good behavior in prison.

¹¹ Northern Correctional Institution is a maximum security, or "super-max" facility. Inmates may be sent there for disciplinary infractions.

Northern. Back then the “I don’t care” factor was there. It takes a whole lot now to get me so angry I think I have to fight.

Now, when I show people the letters I write to my daughter and son, it shocks them. I showed the letters to this one C.O.¹², and he said, “When did you learn to speak like that? You do remember you used to be crazy? It just surprises me to hear you talk and explain stuff to your kids when I watched you do the same stuff you’re telling them not to do.”

I want my kids to get an education so they can have better prospects down the line. I don’t want them to be stuck in what I’m stuck in and what their mother’s stuck in. I don’t want them to be in that situation. I tell my kids, “Listen, I used to be a fool. I tell you this because I don’t want to see you doing any of this stuff. I’m in here and not there to help. As I write to you, you need to take heed.” My son just turned 19, and my daughter is 18. My son likes to fight. He’ll fight in a heartbeat. He’s been in juvenile detention before. I told him, “You don’t want to be in here.” I only hope he’s smart enough to not make the same mistakes that I made.

After I got out of Northern, I was learning and reading a lot. I tried to make changes. I tried to calm down. I had already gotten my G.E.D. at the youth facility, and I become one of the youngest tutors there. So then I learned trades, like doing hair, cooking, and painting the facilities. I took whatever college courses I could get into. I took computer courses. I took language courses. I speak fluent Spanish. I’m learning French, and I want to learn Mandarin.

I want to be able to step in front of someone and say, “This is what I’ve done, these are the good things I’m doing.” All along I’ve done stuff to better myself. People to this day say, “If you walk out this door, I’ll give you a job.” C.O.s who’ve been around as long as me say, “If you get out, you’ll have a job.” I can’t be sitting here doing nothing. I don’t want to be here if I’m given an opportunity to be released. The only way to do that is to learn and to do things to better myself.

¹² Correctional Officer. Correctional officers are prison officers responsible for the care, sustody, and control of individuals in prison.

ANTHONY

Anthony is serving a sentence of more than 35 years for felony murder¹³. He was arrested when he was 17 years old.

The following excerpt is from Anthony's letter.

Gradually, a maturity developed and life's lessons became clearer to me. Each institutional program that became available, I participated in, learned, and completed. I learned life skills and became a peer mentor. I was later provided the honor of becoming a hospice and bereavement volunteer, a service I continue to provide. With the financial help of my family, I was able to expand my education and earn an Associate's Degree with a 3.8 G.P.A. Currently, I am completing courses towards a Bachelor's Degree (Psychology Major).

Occupational opportunities provided a wealth of knowledge and experience while I worked as an Optical Lab Technician, Industry Shop Clerk, Librarian's Aide, Recreational Aide, and a Certified Nursing Assistant. When each job offer presented itself, I accepted the chance to acquire a new skill set and working experience.

Working as a C.N.A. and hospice volunteer has created an insight into life that has proven invaluable to me. The ability to give myself to others, to be of service, and to provide care for those suffering through disease and terminal illness has given me another dimension of personal development and life understanding.

This letter may only be a few pages in length as I try to convey significant areas of growth. Each day of my imprisonment has been filled with a plethora of human emotion that required humbleness and patience to balance reflection, shame, progress, guilt, encouragement, and remorse in an endeavor to understand my place in life.

¹³ In Connecticut, an individual may be charged with felony murder if he is convicted of a felony and a person is killed in the course of the crime or flight from the crime. For example, a driver or a look-out in a robbery may be charged with felony murder if another actor in the robbery kills a person during the crime. The driver or look-out may be charged even if there was no intent to kill or the death was accidental.

I am fortunate to have become the man I am. Thankfully, I have had so much help along the way. From the unconditional love of my family, to the guidance and direction of people gracious enough to see past my status as an inmate, each person contributed to the evolution of my maturity. Along with a formal education and personal enrichment learning, I gained what was integral for the self-edification that affirmed my value as a thinking, rational, decent, moral human being.

Each avenue afforded to me by law to express my remorse has been used by me. This statement allows me another opportunity and I want to communicate my apology again. I am sorry and will forever be for the suffering I caused. My contrition not only resides in words, but also my actions and service to others.

My description of growth and maturity are what I offer as evidence of change. A change that created a value system I cannot imagine living without. I am not the same juvenile that failed the victim of my crime, his family, my family, and society. Before you is an adult, rehabilitated, and humble that seeks a second chance in life. Hopefully all I have submitted will provide you with insight into assessing my maturity, atonement, and remorse.

WILLIAM

William is serving a 50-year sentence for murder. He was arrested when he was 16 years old.

The following is an excerpt from William's letter.

Since the age of 16 I've been incarcerated, now for almost half of my life. From the beginning of my sentence, 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.

So when the 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 John'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 is still 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

determination and patience is the key in accomplishing anything you want to do.

The first year I was incarcerated, I obtained my G.E.D. on the second try. The first try I failed by 4 points, the second try I passed by 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 G.E.D. 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 then¹⁴. 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 stay 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 finish eighth grade – 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 have 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.

¹⁴ Passed by exception means that the teacher passes a student, even when the student has technically received a failing grade.

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

DEVON

Devon is serving a sentence of more than 30 years for assault and other crimes. He was arrested when he was 16 years old.

Devon describes the struggles that he and his family went through during his youth: poverty, the death of his father from AIDS, his mother's coping with HIV, and his brothers' involvement in the drug trade. He talks about how he and his family have turned their lives around since he was a child and how proud he is of his family.

I grew up in what we called "the hood." Drugs, violence, alcohol, prostitution – you name it, I lived right at the heart of it. There was no opportunity there. My father died of AIDS when I was twelve. Before that, he was in and out of my life. If I was lucky, he'd pick me up twice a year. He tried to bring toys on Christmas. When he passed away, I cried, and my sister said, "Why are you crying? You didn't know him." But he was my father.

I grew up with my mom. I'm not trying to speak badly about my mom, but she was on heroin. My sister was trying to raise me and my little brother, but she had two kids of her own. Sometimes we went without heat or lights. We were able to eat because my older brothers were in the drug game. They were the providers. I looked up to them.

I liked to play basketball, but that's where everything was happening – drugs, violence, it was happening at the park. I went to school because I liked the females, and I liked to play basketball. I did my work, but I had behavior issues. I had problem-solving issues. I could read, but I couldn't break down and understand what I was reading. I wanted to be noticed, I wanted attention, I wanted to be popular. I guess that's why I was the class clown and always acting out.

I was 16 when I was arrested. I remember the other guys in jail

saying, “They’re going to charge you as an adult.” I was naïve, and I was trying to beat the system. I wasn’t expecting to get the maximum sentence. When I was 19 they moved me to a prison with adults. There were older guys – it was one of the most dangerous prisons. I remember looking at them and being in tears. The C.O.s yelled, “LOCK UP,” and I was scared. In the beginning, you don’t know who to trust. I tried to stay to myself. But there are good people, like an older dude who will sit down and help you. There are good people behind these walls.

I started to study for the G.E.D. test. I passed the overall test, but I couldn’t pass the math section. I had to take it four or five times. It was hard for me. I wasn’t in any classes, because I wanted to get away from the school block – the kids there were young and wild, and I didn’t want to be part of that any more. I studied on my own; I studied at least two hours every day in my cell. I would check in once a week with the school block. It was hard for me – I didn’t like school. But the studying gave me responsibility. I finally passed it and got my G.E.D.

I used to go to church in prison, and I met Bishop Kelly. He took a liking to me. He invited me to his office, and he said, “I want you to meet someone.” He introduced me to Turner. Turner had diabetes, and his arms were cut off right below his elbows. Bishop Kelly took me to the hospital ward to see sick people. It hit me right there. I thought about my mother. My mother was sick with HIV and going through something tough. Bishop Kelly suggested that I do the hospice program. I took the training. I did it on the strength of my mother. Now I’m a hospice volunteer. I love everything about it. It may sound selfish, but it gives me a sense of worth. I think about my mother and how I’d want someone to do this for her.

Growing up changed me. I look at people who are ignorant or who don’t know any better, and I realize that was me. I don’t want that for me or my future or my kids’ future. At first, I tried to block off my feelings because I felt like I had to live up to my name on the street. But it was time for me to grow up. I prayed about changing. When I was a

kid at home, I didn't care about anything. I was a bad person. If I heard about someone getting shot, I didn't care. But I respect life now. Recently, I saw a lady on Oprah who was attacked by a chimpanzee, and I couldn't stomach it—I was almost crying. I realized I have feelings. I care about people. I'm not the same person.

Still there are things I want to develop. I want to know about everything. I want to travel. I'd like to work with computers or as a cook when I get out. I've been into computers since I was little. I loved computer class in school. I was always on my best behavior in computer class. I started to get into cooking in prison. I love to eat. I love to cook whatever and put my own twist on it. I learned how to make anything—chicken, lasagna.

This is a small thing, but when I get out, I want to go to a basketball game. I used to be a great young basketball player until I was shot four times when I was 16. That took my dreams of being a basketball player away. But I still love the game, and I listen to games on the radio. I can't wait to go to a live game and enjoy the experience of being there in person.

When I get out, I definitely want to help my mom. I want to be hands-on with her care. I'm so proud of my family. We've come a long way. Before, my sister was the only one not on the streets. Now, nobody in my immediate family is on the streets. They all have jobs. Before, the family support wasn't there. Now, I'm so proud of them. I respect my brother a lot. He was my role model. When he was selling drugs, he was doing it for a good cause—to feed us. But today he's a man. He's working for his kids. It's been ten-plus years, and he hasn't been back to that life of selling drugs. I honor that. I look up to him.

My family is very supportive. Now I have two families—my family and then my wife and her family. I met my wife when we were teenagers, and we got married when I was in prison. She comes up here a lot to visit. She is about to get her bachelor's degree. I wish I could be

at her graduation this May. We want to have a family someday. I can't wait to have a family. My wife wants enough kids for a football team! I want two kids. Hopefully I get out of here when I still have time to have a family.

I'm looking forward to having my own apartment and my own bank account. My little brother has a job and his own apartment. He has his own car and his own responsibilities. I can't wait for my responsibilities as a man. I want to be out, live a normal life, and help my family. Also, I want to help the police in the inner city deal with teenagers better. I want to help police communicate with youth and help create a better relationship between communities and law enforcement. It would be a start in rebuilding our communities. I want to help kids who are where I was when I came in here. I want to help kids so that they don't come here.

BRANDON

Brandon is serving a 20-year sentence for manslaughter. He was arrested when he was 17 years old.

He describes how he has changed over his time in prison.

I came in here with a lot of young guys from M.Y.I.¹⁵ We're all supporting each other from the group that came over from M.Y.I. If someone is doing something that's not right, we'll pull him to the side and say, "That's not us. We don't do that anymore." We correct each other's actions. These are all people serving long sentences. About 90% of us are on the right track. We're ready to go home. There's a small proportion of the group that hasn't changed, but most of us have. We've changed just being in here, seeing guys go in and out. We see older guys going in and out. It's pitiful. I started doing everything I could to change. My thought frame changed – it's all positive now.

It's crazy to treat kids the same way as adults. There's a difference between guys who come in when they're older and guys who come in when they're younger. The changes are bigger in guys who come in as kids. My situation didn't sink in when I was a teenager. My sentence sunk in when I was about to turn 20. I realized I was really on my own. I had nobody to support me and a 20-year sentence. I have to do this on my own. It made me think about my future. I'd never want to see anyone else go through this. For the future, I want a family. I want to work in fitness and nutrition. I want to keep away from anything that would land me back in here.

¹⁵ Manson Youth Institution. M.Y.I. serves as Connecticut's primary prison for sentenced inmates under the age of 21.

SHAWN

Shawn is serving a 30-year sentence for felony murder. He was arrested when he was 17 years old.

The following excerpt is from Shawn's letter.

To know that I am responsible for taking from two children what drugs took from my siblings and me – a father – eats at me, as it rightfully should. It is for this reason that I fight daily to grow to be better than I was the day before, better than I was when I was 17. It may mean little, but it is all that I can do. I am obligated to my victim's family to change. It is an obligation that has given me a vision to leave here and save lives, to prevent other wayward teenagers and young adults from victimizing generations, and to keep other young teens and young adults from being buried by parents that they should outlive.

For me that is the only justification for my early release, not to move on with my life, nor to put the past behind me, but to prevent the past from becoming two other families' present and future. Doing time is the penalty for the crime, but it isn't justice, it isn't restitution. These things cannot be measured by the length of confinement because confinements end, but the loss is permanent. What early release does for me is it gives me a chance to let my actions reflect my remorse and my repentance for the actions of a lost teenager.

This may not give an iota of peace to my victim's family, but I need them to see me going, to know that I am dedicated to changing the kind of environments that led to the abrupt and violent end of their son's life. There is no other way for me to relay that than through actions. Words mean nothing without the actions to back them up, and I desperately need them to know this. Not for their forgiveness, that is not something that I can earn, and forgiveness may be something that they will never give. But justice demands that I live a life of servitude, a life of prevention. Restitution demands that I pay back the mercy that I have

received by reaching out to those who are as lost as I once was, who feel as disconnected as I once did, whose frustrations and pain have no voice and outlet like mine once lacked.

I am now a man, who now fully understands the things that I couldn't as a teenager. I struggle with the reconciliation of the man that I am and the child that I was. Now, I have an extensive vocabulary, the ability to synthesize all of the social elements that led me here. I am also able to articulate my frustrations and pain, tools that I did not have as a teenager. Now, I realize that all this understanding of the past doesn't change the past. Nothing does.

I believe that the God I serve has forgiven me. However, I am also indebted to the victim's family, his friends and community, as well as my city. I carry that debt with me, and I will live then, as I live now; attempting daily to pay it by fighting for young men who live as I lived, fighting for their change, fighting so they will not carry this debt one day and families will not suffer as my victim's family has suffered, nor will other families have to bare the shame that mine has born because of my actions. I live a life of restitution, and I will not squander this opportunity.

JEREMY

Jeremy is serving a sentence of more than 30 years for manslaughter. He was arrested when he was 16 years old.

Jeremy initially struggled in prison, getting into fights and being sent to solitary confinement. He reflects on how he changed during his late teenage years and later took advantage of a range of educational and vocational programs in prison.

When I first came in to jail, I was getting in lots of fights. I was sent to seg¹⁶ a lot. I was living in a population where criminal thinking was ideal. It was all that was known. I hid how I felt and the reality of my situation and instead fought. There was an atmosphere – a collective thought built from tension, anger, and fear – that lacked the understanding that change was truly available. You either fought or got beat up, and once you got beat up, you continued to get beat up. I had a chip on my shoulder. I was always depressed. People around me were the same – they were so full of anger, and I related to the anger.

In seg, you're in there by yourself. You have lots of time to think. I would sit back and think about everything – what landed me in prison, the reason for me being in seg. I met an older guy in prison who had been in seg about as much as I had. He encouraged me to make better decisions and face forward. I also met Captain Jones while I was in seg. He convinced me that I was full of potential. He spoke to me and encouraged me. He enrolled me in a G.E.D. program as soon as I got out of seg. There were a couple of times when I almost gave up, but instead of using the normal form of institutional punishment, Captain Jones spoke to me. He treated me like one of his own children – he treated me like a human. He told me that there were things I could do from here and that there was a lot available to me.

¹⁶ Segregation, also known as solitary confinement.

I began to gravitate towards education. I also started keeping to myself more and away from the people I used to hang out with. I dedicated time to going to school every morning and to working out. I made a decision to ignore anything that would cause me to go back to seg—I didn't respond to anything that wasn't positive. The path of living began to open. I decided to review who I was—it took a couple of years.

Ms. Lewis, the teacher in the G.E.D. program, truly cared about our growth. I was able to graduate in about eight months and, at 17, I became her first tutor. I began to excel. I tutored students in literacy and had my own classroom. I established pride in myself. I realized I was worth more than I thought in the past.

I started to dream after I met Captain Jones and Ms. Lewis. In the street, I didn't really have any dreams—I didn't really see that far. Everything was now. There was an urgency. I didn't think far enough. I didn't dream. The only things around me were of a negative nature. Years later, I met Captain Jones again in another facility. By this time, I had accomplished so much, and there was a noticeable change in me. He told me he was proud of me.

After getting my G.E.D. and becoming a tutor, I signed up for a business course because it interested me. But the classification committee at the prison didn't let me take the course, because I had gotten disciplinary infractions when I was 16 and 17. They told me that I would have to wait for years to take courses. I asked them for any chance, and they allowed me to get a job as a janitor. They said that if I did well, I could take classes a few months later. As a janitor, I cleaned the room where the business class was held. I was able to talk to the business class teacher a couple of days when I was cleaning the room. I explained to him how when I was on the streets I wanted to be in business. I didn't want to be selling drugs, I wanted to sell something else and be part of society. I told the teacher that I was a tutor and other things about myself. The teacher gave me the books for the class and a test. He said to take the class from my cell—study on my own, then he would test me every day,

and we would go from there. The teacher didn't even know me, but he believed in me.

After that, if I wanted to get into any program, I would make a promise to myself first and then I would figure out how to take the program. If there were any obstacles, I would talk to people and explain why I wanted to do the program until they let me. I would talk to teachers. That's how I got into almost every program. These programs helped me build character. Teachers played a very big role for me. There are four or five teachers who really know me and got to know the person I really was. They were very influential in me excelling to greater heights.

Later, I was privileged to participate in a C.N.A. training program and then work as a C.N.A. Here I was able to experience and truly understand compassion and unconditional love. I worked and cared for people who were helpless. I sat with them day and night. These people were bedridden. Who knew these conditions existed within the prisons? Some of these people were on the verge of dying. This was very significant for my growth. I found myself crying at times. I cared for a few individuals whom I met along my course of incarceration who were now making their final transition on earth. We bonded to the point that I was the only one allowed in their rooms at certain times. Listening to their most heartfelt thoughts and being at the most vulnerable part of their life brought me to tears. I prayed with them and did my best to create comfort.

There was someone in the hospital that I knew prior to incarceration who had surgery and lost his ability to move and his ability to speak. Though this friend was never able to speak, over time, he began to move his hands. He would squeeze my hand and grab my face. It was these moments which brought forth all the emotions I had been hiding for so long. One day, I decided to play some music he might remember from the 90s. He began to look around, his eyes followed me, and he began to smile. He was living through us at the hospital. Another day, I decided to show him some pictures of his family. He grabbed them and held them

himself and began to tear up. It was a very powerful moment – it had an impact on everyone.

Being a C.N.A. was my blessing. This hospital, this program was my reward. I needed to be here. I was able to experience the change I've been longing for and contribute to society and humanity. Prior to the C.N.A. training program, the thought of becoming a C.N.A. never crossed my mind. This was more than a program. It was my gift, and it enabled me to experience divine love and compassion. Who knew this 16-year-old juvenile would grow and contribute to something so profound, something with substance?

When I get out of prison, I need to get reacquainted with my family and reestablish a family connection. Before, I didn't understand how much me being here impacted my own family. I always thought how it would impact the victim's family. Then I realized that because of me, certain things are rocky for my family. They also have a big void. That was a shocker to realize. I need to rebuild and establish a new foundation so that they know who I am today. They don't know me. They didn't have a chance to hear what I was dealing with. I want to become a productive member of society. I owe it to myself, I owe it to my family, and I truly owe it to the victim's family.

I am going to become a C.N.A. somewhere and work with people who are sick. As a C.N.A., you need to put forward unconditional love to your patients. When it comes back to you, it's a beautiful feeling. I am going to apply all over to be a C.N.A. No matter how many people say no, I'm going to move forward.

CONCLUSION

The juvenile sentencing reform bills currently before the Connecticut General Assembly would give the individuals whose stories you have just read an opportunity for a second chance. Neither House Bill 6581 nor Senate Bill 1062 provides for an automatic release of anyone serving long sentences. Rather, the bills would give these individuals a chance to show a parole board that they have changed and to live out their hopes for the future. The bills would mean an opportunity for these people, who would otherwise sit in prison for most of their lives, to support their families, to give back to their communities, and to become productive members of society. The bills would mean that Jeremy would get a chance to work as a nurse's assistant outside of prison, that William would get a chance to make his mother proud, that Devon would get a chance to start a family with his wife, and that Morris would get a chance to be a real father to his daughter.

There is still time for these two bills to pass this year. Passing the bills would not diminish the seriousness of the crimes for which these individuals have been convicted, and it would not let the crimes go unpunished. It would not change the fact that these individuals are serving very long prison sentences, even if they ultimately receive parole. It would, however, give some people who have already served more than a decade in prison and who have exhibited growth, maturity, and the desire to reform their lives an opportunity to do so. It would assert that Connecticut knows what science and common sense already tell us: Children can change.

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