

Testimony of Harriet Hendel and Stanley Hendel in Support of SB 796

March 4, 2015

Judiciary Committee

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

In 2009, my husband and I began to build a close and deep relationship with Robin Ledbetter (#254512). This connection came about because of Wally Lamb's excellent creative writing program at York which produced *I'll Fly Away*. That year, I was volunteering at Green Haven C.F. (Stormville, NY) working with 120 men on improving their writing skills in order to help them pass the essay portion of the G.E.D. I came across Lamb's book and decided to read stories and poems from the book to my students. They were very touched by one author in particular: Robin Ledbetter and her story called "*The Gift*". One of the men encouraged me to reach out to Robin by letter. It took quite a while for Robin to respond because, as she later explained, she was very depressed at that time. Ultimately, we were cleared to visit. We made the 5 hour round trip to Niantic but never imagined how taken we would be by this sensitive, intelligent, forthcoming young woman.

Over these nearly 6 years, we have observed many things about Robin:

- ~Her strong motivation to learn. {She is now taking her 9th and 10th college class through Wesleyan University. She hopes to earn her degree.
- ~She completed a correspondence class certifying her as an alcohol and drug counselor.
- ~She earned her CNA (Certified Nurse Assistant)
- ~She has won prizes for her creative writing, the most prestigious one awarded by PEN America. Robin was chosen from a nationwide pool of writers who are incarcerated.
- ~She leads support groups at York.
- ~She has participated in the Judy Dworin Dance Group for several years.

Even though we are legal residents of Florida, we support the premise behind this bill for juveniles serving Life Without Parole and for those serving sentences like Robin's.

{Robin was given a 50 year sentence without the possibility of parole when she was just 14 years old}. Scientific research, done after Robin went to prison, tells us teenagers are not just little adults. Their immature behavior is directly a result of their immature (and incomplete) brain development.

Giving a second chance to people like Robin sends a clear message of the possibility of redemption. We believe Robin has even more to give to society beyond York's prison

walls. If she were to be released, we are committed to making a home for her in either one of our homes (NY and FL). By giving Robin her freedom long before she turns 64, the state of Connecticut offers her the opportunity to pay back her debt to society.

We are retired teachers with a combined total of 63 years in the public schools of NY and NJ. We have visited Robin nearly 40 times since 2009. On one of those visits about a year ago, we invited a man who was head of Guidance for the Monroe-Woodbury School System (Orange County, NY) and also the head of Special Services to visit Robin with us. {He was my immediate supervisor for 15 years}. Rudy Lantelme was so impressed with Robin that he has continued to correspond with her. He has said that Robin could offer so much more on the outside and that her full potential is not being fulfilled.

We hope this bill will be carefully thought out and ultimately be able to give those serving time a second opportunity to establish themselves as productive members of society.

Thank you for allowing us to express our thoughts in this manner in lieu of speaking at the public hearing given we are now in Florida for the winter.

Sincerely,

Harriet Hendel
Member of the Board of Directors of The Innocence Project of Florida

and

Stanley Hendel