

Written Testimony of Wally Lamb
Connecticut Sentencing Commission
November 29, 2012
Juvenile Sentencing Proposal

Dear Sentencing Commission Members:

I submit this testimony in support of juvenile sentencing reform on behalf of a student with whom I work in a writing program at York Prison. I'll call her Keesha. Here's an excerpt of a poem she wrote titled, "Where I'm From."

I'm from brick buildings and concrete parks
From a place where government cheese and Oodles of Noodles make a meal.
I'm from weed smoke, crack smoke, coke heads and dope heads
From swim lessons in an open fire hydrant and street games like red light, zum-zum, and
the ones grown-ups want to play called
"Can you keep a secret?"
I'm from secrets.
From Grandma carrying a Bible she cannot read
From Daddy missing, and Mommy's love a memory
I'm from "You better be home before them street lights go on"
From roaches laying face-up in a puddle of Raid
From brick buildings with no basements and concrete parks
I'm from a place called longing

The daughter of heroin addicts who could not raise her, Keesha was shunted from relative to relative, from group homes to detention centers until she eventually became a child of the streets. At fourteen, she was a runaway who, along with an older boy, participated in a robbery-gone-wrong that resulted in homicide. Prior to Keesha's trial and conviction, her father, newly "born again," advised her that the truth would set her free. And so, both streetwise and naïve, Keesha complied with the version of the truth her prosecutor had spun. A probation officer declared in his pre-sentence investigation that she would be a life-long menace to society who should be locked away indefinitely. Her judge agreed, and at the age of fourteen—*fourteen*—Keesha was imprisoned as an adult and subsequently handed a 50-year sentence. In the early years of her incarceration, she attempted suicide three different times because, in her words, "How do you begin a life at age 64 when you never even started one?" Nevertheless, now in her early thirties, she has become a mature, responsible, and fully rehabilitated young woman. Don't take my word for it. Take hers.

In an essay she wrote titled "Laying Roots," Keesha says, "I know now that I am more than a career criminal. I was young, messed up, and homeless. I needed money. On the streets you basically have three choices: sell drugs, sell your body, or rob people. Drugs had ruined my parents and destroyed my family; I could never push that poison. I would never sell myself; the fear of rape and HIV cancelled that out. So robbery seemed like my only option. My father had talked about pulling off robberies when I was little—romanticizing it, never speaking of anything going wrong. No one ever got hurt during a robbery--or so I thought.

“When I committed my crime, I did not yet understand the concept of death. Oh, I knew that when you die, you are buried and gone forever. But I didn’t understand the pain of loss to your children, the devastation of a parent’s loss, or the ripple effect in a community. I had been abused my entire life, and so did not appreciate that life has value. How could I appreciate someone else’s life when I couldn’t appreciate my own?”

“In the years that I have been at York C.I., however, I have learned the true value of human life, and with it the devastation that my crime had caused. It hit me like a runaway train and, for a time, I was drowning in a guilt so severe that I thought I could never forgive myself for what I had done and might as well just end it. But lying on a plastic mattress in mental health after one of my suicide attempts, I began to realize that I am more than I ever thought I could be. Since then, I have gotten my GED, become trained as a Certified Nurse’s Assistant, done many groups, and become a role model to a lot of the younger inmates. Having bled this place of all the resources available to a woman with my time, I now sit and stagnate.

“And yet, I no longer take for granted the blessings God has given me. He has saved me from so many things, including myself. And so I now facilitate an Alternatives to Violence group. I speak to at-risk youth. I have a true spiritual connection with God. I have now spent more time *in* prison than I have *outside* of it, and I have come so far. What I want and what I pray for is a chance to break free from this pot of prison life so that I can lay down roots in the ground beyond these walls.”

Commissioners, current research on the adolescent brain and its slowly developing ability to engage in responsible decision-making speaks to the harsh injustice of handing kids like Keesha what amounts to life sentences before they have had the chance to become adults. And so I come here today to ask you—*implore* you—to hammer out a proposed bill and help get it passed so that our state can undo the damage of past administrations and past legislative sessions and create a procedure by which juvenile offenders with long sentences can get a “second look”—a second chance—after they have served a portion of their sentence.

Connecticut needs to stop throwing away the lives of children prematurely branded as hopeless incorrigibles. We need to replace hopelessness with hope and give inmates like Keesha a “second look” by which they might have the opportunity to access responsible adult lives *beyond* the gate and the razor wire-crowned walls. Women like Keesha have earned this chance through the hard but necessary work of rehabilitation.

---Wally Lamb, author and educator