

To: The Connecticut Sentencing Commission  
From: Linda Meyer  
Date: November 29, 2012

Dear Commissioners,

As many of you know, I have been involved in researching the issue of juvenile sentencing, and that research has been presented separately by the Quinnipiac Law School Clinic. But I'd like to share with you why I began to devote so much time and energy to this issue.

Last year I taught a college course at York Correctional pro bono. Because I had heard that scarce programming resources are often directed (sensibly) to those who have shorter sentences and are about to be released, I asked for students with longer sentences or those who did not have other educational opportunities. Consequently, I ended up with about seven students in my class of 15 who were guilty of homicide crimes. Five of them had committed their crimes before they were twenty, two of them before they were seventeen. All of these women had been in prison for a long time already. And so, every Friday for three hours over the course of six months, I had a very good opportunity to take a "second look" at some of those who committed serious crimes in their teenage years.

The course was the freshman seminar that is offered to every Quinnipiac freshman -- "The Individual and the Community." Because the course deals with issues like genocide, hate crimes, inter- and intra-community conflicts, nature/nurture, narcissism and altruism, and ethical and political theory, the readings hit closer to home than I could have imagined. In fact, it was one of the richest and most rewarding teaching and learning experiences I've ever had. The insight, maturity, and thoughtfulness of these students (especially the long-termers who offended as teenagers) were astounding. Four of my students were volunteering for Hospice, and after the first week of class, they apologized for being less than perfectly prepared, because they had been sitting 24/7 by the bedside of a young woman who was dying of cancer in the prison hospital. Later, when a short-termer found out that her boyfriend had died from a drug overdose just weeks before her release, the long-termers (many of whom had attempted suicide in the past) made sure she came to class anyway, and they literally held her up. On the last day of class, she told them that she couldn't have made it without their support and she was "blessed" to have known them. These women helped each other through the course in more mundane ways as well - helping proofread each others' papers, encouraging each other not to quit, and complimenting each other on grades and achievements. Their comments in their papers and in class conversations were likewise indicative of how far they had come from the choices that took them to prison.

**First, it is important to remember that these offenders were young when they committed their crimes. Some of the stories and comments they shared with me in their papers brought this home. For example:**

*"When the transfer orders came ... the staff at the juvenile facility where I was housed tried to prepare me for what was ahead. In addition to several pep talks they packed a care package of a few cosmetics, some extra underclothes, my photos, and a teddy bear that my mother had given me. I kept it in my room and slept with it every night while I was in juvie. When I arrived at York my*

*property was taken to be searched. The guard in charge of my intake laughed at the sight of the bear. The idea that I had one in tow was humorous to him and he told me this as he cut the head of the bear searching for contraband. A term that at the time was foreign to me. I cringe at the thought of how ignorant I was entering this prison and at how I must have looked standing in front of that guard teary-eyed as he decapitated my bear. I had been in the system for a year already before the transfer and I still hadn't grasped the magnitude of my offense and what it meant for my victim and his family or even myself. ... It's a testament to the way a child's brain works and the inability to fully understand the magnitude of their actions."*

*"I come from an urban background with a father who was involved in organized crime and a mother who had a fierce, hair trigger temper which led her to be arrested numerous times for her attacks on others. My family was deemed 'cool' by the street's standards. It was normal and even expected of me to have been a gang member myself by the time I was twelve years old. ... I learned very early in life that within my environment, my household, my family background, expressing anguish, hurt or sadness was unacceptable and in some cases extremely dangerous. Feelings of abandonment are not the sort of thing teenagers can talk about within family or without. With no verbal outlet, I traveled into adulthood with maladaptive coping skills and found solace in a different way and am now considered to be a 'self mutilator,' a 'cutter.' ... When I learned how to substitute my tears for self-inflicted pain, I realized that I c[ould] control my pain. ... Some would say I was a product of my environment, others would assume it was in my blood to turn out exactly like my family. I would tell you that my heart and my behaviors were in a constant internal battle. I have never wanted to be all that I was. I yearned for a college degree, a big back yard with a white picket fence. I did succumb to the pressures of my environment. It was hard to understand and adjust to the fact that the rest of society didn't consider this behavior acceptable when my exposure was violence in the home. However, I never once felt at home with the life style I chose to live. Today I am allowing my heart to take the lead and am trying to change the legacy I inherited."*

**Second, it is also important to recognize that some of these kids grow up to be kind, self-reflective, and compassionate people, and they are not the same at 30 or 40 as they were at 14 or 15. For example:**

*"I think that many of us who have ended up in prison have suffered from some type of narcissism and self-centeredness. We've suffered from arrested development, some aspects of what Freud calls 'primary narcissism,' and when we do what we consider good things we want to respond as a child would and say, "Hey, Mom, look at me!" ... Most of us long-termers have clawed our way from the bottom. Being broken and stripped of everything we have a reality check and we're forced to live the bare minimum. We then have to piece ourselves together with our own wits. For those of us who have had our esteem trampled on all our lives, we can take pride in our growth, but we can't allow that pride to expand into self-centered and self-righteous beliefs. We will find ourselves lost again. We must give compassion everywhere we can. We must be the first helping hand others receive on their way up from the bottom."*

*"Prison is not a country club. It is an awful place to live and it is dangerous. There is a lot written about how horrible it is to be incarcerated and how society's scum resides within these*

walls, but like anything and anywhere you go, prison is what you make of it. You have a choice of how you are going to do your time. There are a lot of people making the best out of a bad situation. ... Prison is full of good people who made bad decisions. If you are entering this prison, I would advise you to make the best out of your circumstances. Find something outside of yourself to direct your energy on. Acclimate yourself to the positive side of prison and positive people and your time would not be served in vain." "As Martin Luther King said, "Find some great cause, some great purpose, some loyalty to which you can give yourself and become so absorbed in that something that you give your life to it."

"I was kicked out of my home at a young age so I was forced to drop out of school in order to find shelter. Because I wasn't 'smart enough' to hold a conversation with women of a greater caliber, I became insecure and I felt stupid. I then spent all my time with others who were as uneducated as me and did what those who had no real goals or motivation did. I hung out in the streets with gang members, drug dealers, and people prone to mischief. ... Receiving my G.E.D. within the prison system changed the entire course of my life. I became a positive thinker. I chose different people to keep as friends. ... Gone were the days of thinking ghetto behavior was fascinating. I gained so much confidence just from going to school that it encouraged me to present myself as a lady. Something I never imagined I'd become."

"During the middle of a class discussion, N. and Professor Meyer began to talk about the Constitution. I sat there listening and observing the interaction between teacher and student and was intrigued by the amount of information N. had to offer. My ears were listening but my eyes were soaking up all the things no one else would even think to pay attention to. Like me, N. has been incarcerated since she was 14 years old. She has been in prison longer than she has been free. How is it that this woman has the knowledge that she does? I stare at her in awe, mesmerized by this woman whom I met as a child. My thoughts drift off to a time when we had just met. She was 14 years old and I was 21. We were on the tier playing a game of scrabble and she became frustrated with her choice of words and in a rage she smacked the game to the ground and angrily reminded me that she has a grammar school education and it wasn't fair of me to use such 'big words.' I brought myself back to the present moment and continued to listen to the exchange of facts pertaining to another topic of conversation ... I viewed N. as my hero. ... How is it that she's so smart? I watched her turn from an angry, bitter, thug. A child. Into a woman that exemplified class and dignity."

"We do change. We grow up, mature, and become good people."

**One of my "short-termer" students summed up my experience teaching this class better than I can:**

"This class and the people in it put a very human face on what I believed evil was and it didn't look like I expected. These people whose actions were evil are not my definition of evil people. ... I am not as quick to judge human behavior, nor am I as quick to label people evil. I am not on such a moral high ground that I can't separate individuals from actions."

In sum, the difficult truth I've come to is this: Good people can do terrible things that they deeply regret, especially when they are young and impulsive and surrounded and scarred by violence. The Supreme Court has said that it is cruel and unusual punishment to require a life for a life automatically in juvenile cases. Instead, the Court tells us, we can only impose life without parole if juveniles are "irredeemable." My experience has convinced me that many of those who did wrong as teenagers may well be able to demonstrate that they can, in their own words, "grow up, mature, and become good people."

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