

Senator William Smith, Chair
Senator Jeffrey Waldstreicher, Vice Chair
Judicial Proceedings Committee

Tuesday, February 5, 2020

SUPPORT for Senate Bill 591

My name is Renela W. I am testifying on Senate Bill 591 (SB 591) – Petition to Modify or Reduce Sentence (Maryland Second Look Act). I am testifying in support of SB 591.

I am a younger sister of a juvenile lifer. At the age of 17, my older brother was given a life sentence with all suspended except 35 years for a crime that was committed at the age of 16. I believe it is fair for him and others like him to be afforded the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in this world; instead of being written off as a criminal who is irredeemable. There are several reasons why I believe this. First, I believe it is beneficial for all parties involved in a crime whether perpetrator or victim to understand the factors surrounding a crime in order to have a complete picture of who someone is, why, and the subsequent life decisions that follow. I am convinced that this would lead to forgiveness, healing, and rehabilitation for all.

Myself and all 6 of my siblings, including my brother, had a traumatic upbringing. Both of our parents were addicted to drugs, which caused us to be split up into different family members' homes. I, along with one of my other brothers, lived with my brother who is currently incarcerated, at our grandmother's house. As our living there was not anticipated, it was a rather cramped living space, with other family members residing there as well. My brother was the oldest sibling living in that house and was responsible for much of our care such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, and bathing. He was 6 when we were abandoned by our parents. Before that, there were things that he observed and experienced as a young boy that were inappropriate and traumatizing. He was 6 years old and younger, yet had to endure the burdens of an adult.

He had no positive male guidance, mentorship, or role model. Moreover, he never received therapy or counseling that would help him to cope with his reality. As a result, he began experimenting with drugs as a coping mechanism. He also began keeping company with older males in order to fill the void he was missing as a result of our parent's absence. A young man dealing with trauma and harsh living conditions is bound to make poor decisions. However, I do not believe someone should have to pay for a poor decision for the rest of their life; due to a reality that one did not create, nor had the power or tools to overcome.

Later this year he will have been incarcerated for the same amount of time that he was free, 17 years. He is a completely different person. Him and I have kept a close relationship over time and I have witnessed his growth and maturity firsthand. During

his first year, he obtained his GED. He has completed an auto mechanics class and has held several jobs. In addition, he has continually been furthering his education by taking the initiative to read books on a consistent basis; ensuring perpetual learning and development. Furthermore, he is remorseful and very empathetic towards the victim. I wholeheartedly believe that if knowing what he knows now as a 33 year old, he would not make the same decision and would advise others against it. It is my sincerest belief that there are so many other people who have a story similar to my brother.

In conclusion, I am in support of the Senate Bill 591 advocating for lifers to receive the opportunity to have their case reviewed based on their institutional record/efforts towards growth and rehabilitation. It is my hope that you will be in favor of this bill as well. Just as I would want a second chance if I made a mistake that I was sincerely apologetic about, I believe other people deserve the same treatment; rather incarcerated or not. It is also my hope that the victim and/or victim's family would have the opportunity to become aware of the change and feel some amount of relief and healing.

Regards,

Renela W.