



INSIDE

Personal Reflections / Views Pg. 02

Cultural Pg. 05

Still Going Pg. 08

Meet the Staff Pg. 07

Feedback Pg. 11

Views on LIFE is a biannual newsletter published by people dedicated to ending life sentences in Michigan (and ultimately the nation). Our rationale is that life sentences are counter-productive to criminal justice and "correctional" objectives. Ending them is therefore in society's best interest. Given that all members of society have a vested interest in such an important and impactful a goal, *Views on LIFE* seeks to bridge the gap between society and lifers by providing a safe literary space to engage in healthy dialog and debate; a space which must include those whose views differ from our own. For our part, we will provide information on a variety of topics, including ethnographic accounts of challenges unique to lifers (such as our efforts at ethical transformation despite the hopelessness of release); shed a spotlight on Felony Murder; sift through the collateral damage on the families and children of lifers; critique pop culture's portrayal of lifers; and, in the process, dispel the myths, misconceptions, and misunderstandings surrounding people serving life without parole.

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Without Hope There Is No Life By **RÉNE RODRÍGUEZ**

As the deadline for this article quickly approaches, I was hesitant about the topic to write on. Choosing a topic is not only important to me, as such a subject reflects who I am, but also to the readers, who may or may not be influenced by the topic I choose. For me, this is the point behind *Views on LIFE*. That is, to create a safe conversational space for lifers to share a piece of themselves with the readers of this newsletter in hopes of providing insight and a greater understanding into how lifers think, feel, and act as people sentenced to serve the rest of their lives in prison.

That being said, the opportunity to create a safe space for a conversation is a unique outlet I've never heard of in the past 28 years of my incarceration. As a result, I see this outlet as enriching, positively influencing the lives of lifers. There are not many organizations, especially those that advocate for criminal justice and prison reform, that really speak on the issues that affect lifers. If they do, they do it in such a way that gives the impression that the issues are of little importance, which is not conducive to the humane treatment of lifers.

Lifers need an outlet like the one this newsletter offers to raise and focus on the issues that impact their lives in prison. Otherwise, lifers will continue to be ignored and prevented from having the ability to engage in the much-needed conversation of what their future looks like. Without a future, there is no hope, and without hope, there is no life.

I know this information from personal experience. When I first came through quarantine (a process that every convicted felon goes through to get screened for rehabilitative programming) I was informed that no educational programming will be recommended because I was a lifer. The Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) callously claimed that it would be a waste of time and resources to rehabilitate me due to the fact that I will be spending the rest of my life in prison. Entering the prison system as a dysfunctional, broken 19-year-old person and then being told the MDOC is not willing to invest in my future, set in motion a mindset of unproductive behavior that lasted throughout many years of my incarceration. No future, no hope.

However, through hardships and personal growth, I realized that there was much more to life than the product of useless behavior. So, I initiated my own reform and rehabilitation through the use of books, which coincidentally the MDOC had no issues with because I was using my own resources and not theirs. In any case, taking charge of my own rehabilitation led me on a journey that eventually resulted in earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from Calvin University. It is through education that I am a new person—a person that sees self-worth and endless possibilities for a better future. I also see the worth in others, especially for lifers that have been stigmatized by the prison system labeling them as “a lifer.” I found hope.



A Life in Limbo**By KEN UNCAPHER**

What does life look like to a person sentenced to life in prison? For me, it has been an endless barrage of retributive punishments, systematic dehumanization, and overcrowded warehousing. Life in prison means, to the thousands serving this sentence in Michigan, that they have, in a sense, been exiled from humanity and now must merely exist in a dark and hopeless world.

Our judicial system is permeated with the Biblical idea of *lex talionis*, better known as the law of an eye for an eye, or in other words, punishing an act. But if you ask any politician or prison official, our prison system aims to rehabilitate, to correct. “Correction” is right in the name Michigan Department of Corrections.

I have served twenty years of my life sentence and in that time, I have tried to take state-run classes that are meant to teach one how to deal with violence and impulsive actions.

You would think that since a lifer, by very definition, one who is incarcerated for the most violent of crimes, would be the target demographic for these classes. Yet, this group is barred from taking them in order to ensure there is room for the soon-to-be-paroled. If a lifer wants to correct him/herself s/he must do so on their own, if they haven't abandoned hope altogether.

So, what does a life sentence mean to me? It means that, as far as the courts, parole board, and most citizens are concerned, I am irredeemable, that I am and always will be my worst mistake. I exist in a world that offers no hope. But hope for a lifer can be a double-edged sword, offering a glimmer of redemption on one hand and a never-ending onslaught of disappointment on the other. A lifer clings to that small chance that s/he will get to prove that they are redeemable.

Someone once asked me the question, “How do you punish something that you know will never happen again?” According to data published by The Sentencing Project, people convicted of murder have a 2% rate of recidivism after five years. That is the second lowest rate of recidivism among categories that involve a violent crime. In fact, many of the lifers I know, myself included, are first-time offenders, our crimes are situational, and many have a cleaner prison record than most prisoners about to be released back into society. I watch men get out and return repeatedly. It's like salt in an open wound to know I will never get just one of the many chances taken for granted by so many.

In Michigan, life means life. As long as that is true, thousands of people will forever remain in a world that has labeled them as irredeemable. I carry the guilt of my actions with me always and will never forget the pain my impulsive actions have caused others. If our laws are Biblically influenced, then they should leave room for the one doctrine that matters most: redemption.



18 and Life ...**By SHAWN ENGLAND**

I was 18 years old when I killed a man. In some states I would have been charged as a juvenile and given a term of years in which to grow and rehabilitate. In some counties, I would have been offered a plea bargain and given a term of years to ease the burden upon the court system. I committed murder in Michigan where, until recently, an 11-year-old was sentenced as an adult. Additionally, I committed the crime in Bay County, where nobody had been murdered in over two years until I did. What this means is that I was tried and convicted, of an admittedly horrible offense, and given a mandatory sentence of life without the possibility of parole.

Essentially, mandatory sentences proclaim that people are incapable of change or rehabilitation. Think about the implications of that statement when applied to an 18-, 19-, or 20-year-old. Think for a moment about yourself at those ages. Were you the same person you are now? Would you make the same choices? Those who claim that people are adults by those ages often try to justify their position by claiming that the nature of the offense is such that even a child must be locked away forever, and that the child can never grow or mature.

In a telling example of the way some people can hold an incoherent, draconian position, an 18-year-old in Minnesota was charged as a minor in possession of a weapon and as an adult for murder, at the same time. How is this possible? How can a judge, overseeing this process, allow that to continue? How can our legislature allow this to continue? How can our citizens allow this to continue?

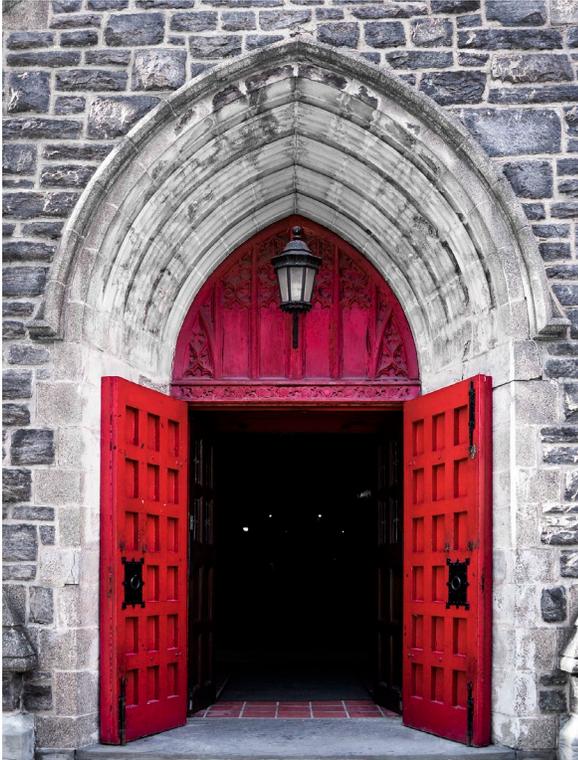
More and more of the youth in the United States are falling victim to a culture of violence, their choices are being constrained by the environment in which they live and then they are being punished for reacting the way they have been taught. It is time to change the way we as a culture sentence young people. It is time to do away with mandatory minimums and treat juveniles as people who have the potential to grow, mature, and rehabilitate rather than as lost causes who need to be warehoused and forgotten.

I am 50 years old. I fully expect to die in prison for the worst 15 minutes of my life. I did a horrible thing and have spent the past 32 years paying for it. I cannot believe that my life in prison serves to make the world a better place. In writing this, I am doing what I can do to change the way people think about the justice system, what can you do?



Life-Giving Reconciliation Changed My LIFE Sentence

By VALMARCUS JONES



Nearly 28 years ago, I led a gang organization and believed that I had power over life and death—including the life of a neighbor who interfered with my drug business. I believed I was justified in taking his life over “street business.” It didn’t matter that he was a son, father, and brother because I was only thinking of what mattered to me.

However, while I was being sentenced to life in prison for this hideous crime, the victim’s mother stood up in court and offered her forgiveness. I was so full of myself and pride that I couldn’t receive it. Yet, it wasn’t long before true conviction set into my heart, and I made the decision to return to my roots as a Christian. I gained a deep desire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and experience His transforming power to change my life.

Throughout the journey of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, my mission in life became clear. Not only did God sacrifice His son to reconcile the world to Himself, but as a believer I’m now called to the ministry of reconciliation. My life could no longer be my own, so I devoted myself as an instrument of God’s love, forgiveness,

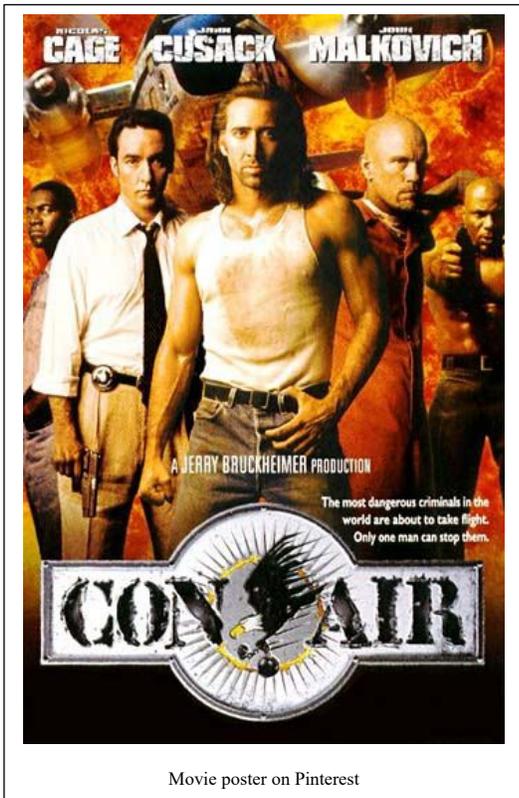
and reconciliation. I didn’t know how, but I needed to make things right with my victim’s family. I found myself enrolling and then being accepted into the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI) program, not knowing they had strong ties with my victim’s family.

Consequently, the CPI community became a direct link to my victim’s family. The program created a safe place where I was given the opportunity to finally express to the victim’s mother how horribly sorry I am for taking the life of her son and to accept her forgiveness. This became a pivotal point in doing life in prison. While I built a relationship with her, she also became an advocate for getting men like me out of long, unjust prison terms. Personally, after this experience I could no longer view prison as wasted time; it became more about leading others to be reconciled in Christ—inheriting eternal life.

Today, as a result of mimicking Christ’s love, forgiveness and reconciliation, Mother Jerlin now refers to me as her son. Our relationship has not only directly impacted our lives, but also family and friends, along with the broader community. CPI has given me and fellow students a platform to share our stories through programs like the Restorative Justice and Writers Clubs, and many other outlets that have encouraged and given hope to the hopeless. The CPI model includes three primary points: think deeply, act justly, and live wholeheartedly. In doing so, I’m able to help others experience the same life-giving reconciliation that changed my life sentence.

Movie Review: “Con Air” - Fearmongering at its Worst

By DAVID PAYNE



Movie poster on Pinterest

For this inaugural issue of *Views on LIFE*, let’s blow the dust off a 25-year-old carceral classic that features, yes, lifers. This film is about parolee Camron Poe (Nicholas Cage) who has the misfortune of transferring to his parole state on a federal plane full of heinous lifers. The actual misfortune begins when the flying prison’s criminal cargo violently hijack the plane. Poe, an ex-Army Ranger, single handedly negotiates a gauntlet of mega-action to foil the diabolical escape plan and reach his anxiously awaiting wife and daughter.

From this lifer’s perspective, “Con Air” has all the realism of a Bugs Bunny cartoon. The film’s portrayal of lifers is sorely lacking in complexity and authenticity. In fact, I think the most dangerous things from this film is its gluttonous helpings of the stereotypical “convict.”

According to “Con Air,” all lifers are uncontrollably violent and incapable of remorse. To the contrary, the film’s “animals” view their crimes as an anthology of their greatest hits, their victims as trophies, and even revere the worst among them as a “national treasure.” The film also normalizes the brutal verbal and physical abuses prison guards rain down on their captives as well as the

prisoners’ cavalier response to these cruelties. After all, “convicts” are used to this kind of treatment, right? At least that is what this film gives society permission to tell itself. But it’s exactly this kind of shallow portrayal I find difficult to reconcile with my experience.

Are all lifers uncontrollably violent? In my 27 years of incarceration, by the grace of God, I haven’t been in a single physical confrontation of any sort. Are all lifers accustomed to a facility staff’s inhumane treatment? I’ve encountered corrections officers who oppose treating incarcerated citizens inhumanely. If there are officers who can’t stomach dishing out abuses, how could I as someone suffering the abuses ever get used to them? Do all lifers lack remorse? While I did not kill anyone to earn my lifer sentence, two people in my case were nonetheless brutally and senselessly murdered. I don’t run around leveraging the circumstances of my case to gain status in some prisoner constructed sadomasochistic societal hierarchy. When I recount that night, it does not generate a sense of pride and accomplishment. It only produces remorse, regret, and often, tears. And the majority of lifers I’ve met over the years share my profound sorrow and commitment to transformation.

Overall, the film makes a very unsophisticated attempt to stigmatize all lifers as inherently and irredeemably evil. So, from a lifer’s perspective, “Con Air” is more concerned with fearmongering than grounding the lifer experience in any kind of reality.

“Con Air” (1997)

Rated R; violence, language

1 hour, 55 minutes

Wait a Minute**Poem By FEDERICO LUIS CRUZ**

Wait a Minute

I know who I am now

I am more than this

Incarceration does not define me

I refuse to allow it

Refuse to allow my personhood diminished

Prison intentionally diminishes human expression

It was designed that way

To purge criminal inclination from incarcerated persons

Persons whose right to dignity is reduced

Thus, the process of dehumanization

But I refuse to succumb to dehumanization

Now that I know my value as a person

Now that I know what it means to be human

Now that I grasp the value of life

I refuse to allow it

Incarceration cannot, will not define me

I know my personhood interconnects with humanity

Wait a minute



Still Going

Interviews By **RENÉ F. RODRÍGUEZ**

Still Going is a section that features lifers holding on to hope. Hope that one day they can prove to society that they are much more than their single worst mistake of their life. Today we feature Barry Steven Walmsley Jr., also known as Brick, and Ronald Wilson Sr. They are just two from the thousands incarcerated in Michigan.

Barry Steven Walmsley Jr.

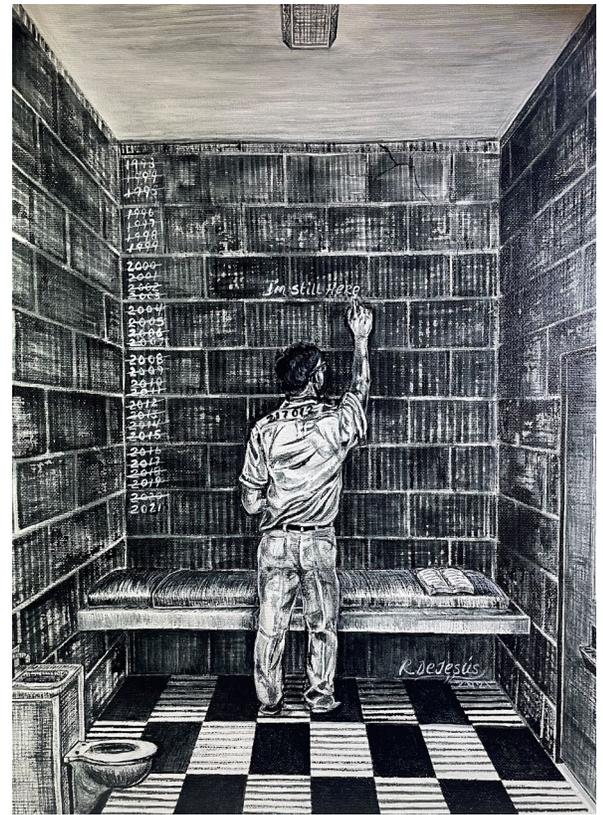
Still going is Barry Steven Walmsley Jr., a Native/African/Cuban/American born citizen who has been incarcerated for 25 years and is serving a life without parole sentence. What keeps Walmsley still going is his commitment to family. “They help me stay strong and balanced in an environment that is often cruel and hostile,” he said.

One of Walmsley’s fondest childhood memories was going on family fishing trips. “Mom and dad would start singing songs in the car and the family would all join in on the singing,” Walmsley recalls. He holds on to this precious memory because the saddest moment of his life was the death of his mother. “Losing my mother as an incarcerated adult was a very difficult time in my life,” he said. “What stands out is the sense of feeling helpless. I mean that I could not properly grieve along with my family from the loss of my mother.”

Walmsley finds it difficult to enroll in the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) programming because of his lifer status. However, he looks for opportunities to engage with peer sponsor programs, such as Thinking for a Change and Cognitive Thinking. “I also try to purchase self-help books whenever I can to help further my self-development in life,” he said.

One opportunity that has been available to Walmsley is the Leader Dog Program. “It’s a program that trains Labradors as guide dogs for people who suffer from blindness,” he said. Walmsley finds this kind of work very rewarding because it gives him a meaningful purpose. “I find purpose by contributing back to society in helping someone who is blind to gain some level of independence,” he said. “Also, having a dog that gives me unbiased affection makes me feel human, which is rewarding.”

The one thing that Walmsley wishes people on the outside would know is that not all lifers are bad people. “Yes, we did a horrible thing that hurt a lot of people, like the victims in our case, the families connected to the victim, our own family, and society as a whole,” he said. “I am paying for that mistake, but I know, like many of us, that I am not the same person I was 25 years ago. There is meaning in life and I know that; and I hope that society takes a chance to learn that about us.”



Drawing By Rafael A. DeJesus

Ronald Wilson Sr.

Still going is Ronald Wilson Sr., a 73-year-old African American. Wilson is serving a life sentence without parole and has been incarcerated since 1975. Forty-six years is a shocking amount of time to be incarcerated. But he shares with us what has kept him strong throughout the years in an environment that is known to place such a strain on one's psyche. "The hope of freedom and seeing my family is what keeps me still going," Wilson said.

During his incarceration, Wilson has successfully earned an associate degree from Jackson Community College, a bachelor's degree from Spring Arbor University, and a Master Gardner certification from Michigan State University. "Both of my college degrees emphasized social science," he said. As for his personal life, Wilson was married but sadly his first wife passed away in 1984. "Before she passed, she gave life to our two beautiful kids," he said fondly. "Two years later, I remarried and had another child that we named Ronald Wilson Jr."

Wilson often mentions his family and is hopeful he can stay healthy enough to reunite with them. "I want my health to maintain without any disabilities until I can see my family in the free world," he said. Until then Wilson keeps busy working with the Leader Dog program. He describes it as one of his greatest joys and most fulfilling jobs. "When I train dogs as guides, I feel a sense of accomplishment in giving back to society," he said. "This is because we're giving help to somebody that really needs help rather than taking something away."

There's one misconception that Wilson hopes to dispel. "There's this stigma that lifers aren't cordial. This is not true," he said. "We have done something really bad which deserves punishment. However, people do change and change for the better. I know [that the person] I was in the past no longer exists."

Like many who have long sentences, Wilson has had plenty of time to reflect on the seriousness of his actions more than four decades ago.

"I am deeply sorry that I took someone's life and I truly regret it because it weighs heavy in my life," he said. "But I also know that I was young, in my 20s and very foolish. I am not that person anymore and if I could do it over, I would definitely choose a different path."





René F. Rodríguez, Founder and Editor-in-Chief

Rodríguez hopes to use this platform as a positive outlet for those serving a life sentence to share their thoughts and views on politics, arts, culture, and everyday life with the purpose of engendering meaningful conversations.

Rodríguez holds a bachelor’s degree from Calvin University.



David Payne, Staff Writer and Contributor, Arts and Culture

Payne writes on a variety of topics, but he especially enjoys analyzing cultural pieces such as films and their portrayal of lifers. Through this lens and with his writing, he hopes to widen people’s perspective by dispelling myths and misconceptions about those currently serving life sentences. Payne holds a bachelor’s degree from Calvin University.



Ken Uncapher, Staff Writer, Contributor, and Social Media Specialist

Uncapher hopes to engender conversations about America’s use of excessive punishments by opening dialogues to discuss its impact and allowing for different views to be acknowledged in order to gain a better understanding of both ends of the spectrum.

Uncapher holds a bachelor’s degree from Calvin University.

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Views on LIFE encourages its readers to send feedback. Your point of view may be published in our newsletter!

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