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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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LETTER

From the Editor

I would like to take the time to apologize to our readers for the delay in delivering our second issue of *Views on LIFE*. Our heartfelt desire is to publish twice a year, and to do so on time. However, with a small staff, limited resources, and situational events that have impacted some of our team members, we incurred a temporary delay.

Last year was filled with highs and lows. On May 9, 2022, Calvin University awarded the class of 2020, 2021, and 2022 with bachelors' degrees. As college graduates with a new outlook on life, my staff members and I successfully launched the *Views on LIFE* newsletter. This was a major milestone. We began with a dream, and it became reality.

On the legal front, the Michigan Supreme Court (MSC) consolidated two pivotal cases on March 2, 2022: *People v Kemo Knicombi Parks* (Docket No. 162086) and *People v John Antonio Poole* (Docket No. 161529). In these cases, the Court granted oral arguments, allowing the defendants to challenge the validity of their mandatory life-without-parole sentence in light of *Miller v Alabama* 567 US 460 (2012). *Miller* was a United States Supreme Court ruling that made it unconstitutional to sentence juveniles (those under the age of 18) to mandatory life without parole. In both *Parks* and *Poole*, the defendants petitioned the MSC for the same protection as those 18 and older.

Their request was based on new scientific evidence which shows that the human brain continues to develop in late adolescence (defined as ages 18, 19, and 20) like those of young juveniles (ages 17 and younger). Making the argument that the same impulsivity in decision-making and self-control of young juveniles, could also be identified in late adolescence (see Brief of *Amici Curiae* Neuroscientists, Psychologists, and Criminal Justice Scholars in Support of Defendant-Appellant Mr. Poole, Feb. 8, 2022). The Brief of *Amici Curiae* further explains that "life without parole is no more justified for late adolescence than it is for young [juveniles]."

On July 28, 2022, the Court rendered an opinion in both *Parks* and *Poole*. In a 4 to 3 decision, the Justices granted 18-year-olds the same protection as in the aforementioned

Miller, but the legal reasoning did not extend to those over 18 at the time of their crime. I was 19.

On the one hand, I was happy that the MSC Justices validated the science and decided to include late adolescence in the same category as young juveniles, granting them equal protection under the law. On the other hand, I was devastated that they only raised the age of late adolescence to 18. The science shows that there is no difference in the brain development of an 18-, 19-, and 20-year-old, compared to that of someone 17 or younger.

I felt lonely, hopeless, and very sad. Adding to my despair, David Payne and Ken Uncapher, fellow staff writers for *Views on LIFE*, were transferred to different facilities. With my state of mind at a low, and the deadline for the upcoming issue looming, our collaboration was made a little more difficult, but not impossible.

Shortly after their departure, I was notified that I too would be transferring to another facility acting as an ambassador of Calvin's Prison Initiative (CPI) program in order to assist the Hope-Western Prison Education Program, mirror CPI. Although I was grateful and humbled to be part of a small, select team, with the backing of CPI's Dr. Todd V. Cioffi, director, and Kary Bosma, director of operations, I was also deeply conflicted because I was leaving behind a group of people that I came to respect, adore, and embrace as part of my extended family. I will truly miss them all!

Despite this year of rollercoaster emotions for me, I am truly grateful to have a supportive team that believes in *Views on LIFE*. I am thankful for my family, who keep me balanced during times of despair. They are my rock and foundation; I love you guys!

To our readers — thank you for being patient and understanding. I appreciate you all. In the future, we hope to get better at producing a fine and informative newsletter on time. May the upcoming year of 2023 be filled with blessings!



Retributive Christianity and Square Circles by DAVID PAYNE

By the time I landed in Jackson Prison's 7 Block housing unit 27 years ago, I pretty much accepted my sentence of life without parole as God's will. Steady streams of Christian ministers and their messages confirmed that the next gates opening for me would be the Gates of Death.

"Lord..." I half-heartedly prayed in that 5 feet by 7 feet cage, "... I suppose if I die in prison, at least I'll have heaven to look forward to." This mental security blanket kept me somewhat warm, that is, until my personal scripture studies snatched it away.

When society, with the church's blessing, issued me a life sentence, I was branded unforgiveable, irredeemable, and incapable of change.

There are some people who support the Old Testament's view on justice and call for an "eye for an eye," (Exodus 21:24) in judicial proceedings. A view classified as retributive and based on the concept of *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica online. A so-called benefit to retributive justice is described in the reference encyclopedia as follows: "Punishing offenders... restores balance to society and satisfies [its] need or desire for vengeance." But the consequences of a strict adherence to that principle can result in a severely disabled society. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "If we do an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will be a blind and toothless nation."

The New Testament, however, gave me a different perspective, despite those who try to extend *lex talionis* to the Christian faith.

According to the Scriptures, life (and death) sentences offend the Messiah's mission to free the prisoners (Luke 4:18-19; compare with Isaiah 61:1-2). They undermine the faith's fundamental virtues of forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15), restoration (Galatians 6:1), and redemption (Mark 15:6-15). Furthermore, they discredit the power of God's spirit to transform the vilest offenders (1 Timothy 1:15). In fact, retributive Christianity must view the atoning death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as God being "soft on crime." There's simply no way to represent a merciless sentence structure as the will of a merciful God. Yet attempts to do just that are nothing new. One of these dates to a 12th century church father named Anselm.

In Book 8 of his work titled "The Proslogion," Anselm argues that God is both merciful and not merciful at the same time. I think Anselm's thesis fails for one simple reason: if what he proposes is possible, then it must also be possible for something to exist and not exist simultaneously. Now that would be a neat trick. But if such inconsistencies are impossible for the divine nature, then they must be equally impossible for those who share in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). This is why a retributive Christian is an impossible being, a logical contradiction with all the conceptual coherence of a married bachelor, a four-sided triangle, or a square circle. There is no such thing as retributive Christianity.

Practicing a scripturally sound and logically consistent Christianity requires the church to align its will with the will of the Christ it claims to serve. If we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23), then none of us can advocate for merciless, retributive measuring rods, like life sentences, without God taking that same rod out of our hand and using it to judge us (Matthew 7:1-2). Our Lord, therefore, mandates His people advocate for sentencing structures that support His vision of forgiveness and restoration for all humanity—including lifers like me.





Unexpected Lessons at Opposite Ends of the Spectrum

By **RENÉ F. RODRÍGUEZ**

Early in my incarceration, I quickly learned that one of the conditions (among many) of living in prison, is the constant state of the unexpected. What I mean is, many things tend to happen that break away from the normal consistency of prison life. Like a sudden heart attack that an incarcerated individual may suffer, an abrupt gang fight jumping off on the prison yard, or a prison siren blowing during mealtime causing individuals to stop eating and immediately lock down in their cells. The point is that you will never find prison life to be concrete, instead, it is fluid, and the unexpected can happen at any time throughout the day.

As an individual who has been incarcerated for 29 years, I have drawn several lessons out of the unexpected despite developing an increased level of anxiety. Here are two lessons at opposite ends of the spectrum.

The first happened two years into my life without parole sentence (LWOP). It was 1995, and I was being housed at the Michigan Reformatory Correctional Facility, opened in 1877 as the State House of Corrections. It was re-named Michigan Reformatory (MR) in 1901.

The movie "Shawshank Redemption," based on a novella by Stephen King, gives a good image of what MR looks and feels like. Anybody who has ever been incarcerated or worked at that facility would agree that MR nurtured a demoralizing, toxic environment.

While at MR, I met a guy named Josh, a 21-year-old white male, starting his 20- to 40-year sentence. He considered himself, despite his incarceration troubles, a family man who loved and adored his wife. Josh would often show me his photo album, reminiscing of the good times he spent with his wife and family.

One day, Josh says to me "Pito, I'm stoked! My wife is coming to visit me in a week." In my not-so-educated vernacular, I replied, "That's the shit! It's good to see family." In anticipation of his wife's visit, Josh couldn't stop talking about it. As each day went by, he became more and more excited. He talked about the visit so much, that I almost felt like I was getting the visit. Talking about his visit sort of helped me to escape the harsh realities of my condition, at least for a few brief moments.

The day of the visit arrived. Hours later, Josh returned, and as I stood by the bars of my cell, I noticed he had an unfocused gaze and was running his hands repeatedly through his hair.

"Hey Josh, how'd the visit go?" I asked. "Not so good," he replied. "My wife told me she's filing for divorce and she is pregnant by my brother." "Damn bro!" I replied. "How are you taking the news?" Josh gave me a blank stare and walked away.

Unexpectedly, and for reasons unknown, Josh was escorted to segregation. That night, while in isolation, he died by suicide, hanging himself. I was so shocked that I couldn't process what just happened. After absorbing Josh's suicide, I took a valuable lesson from his death—at least that is what I told myself. I vowed to never allow my emotions to torment me the way it tormented Josh. I needed to be much stronger mentally. And the best way I thought to do this was by detaching myself emotionally from anything that connected me to the outside world—family, friends, and anyone I cared for or loved.

I deadened my emotions and focused strictly on what concerned me in prison. I began thinking, acting, breathing, dreaming, and living nothing but prison. I deliberately avoided anything outside of prison life. I felt I needed to in order to survive a life without parole sentence. I did not understand the significance of what I was doing, but later learned that I was embracing a form of toxic masculinity.

Living as a hyper-masculine individual in a prison, especially one that nurtures a demoralizing environment, propelled me towards a path of uncertainty.

The second lesson relates to the first and was fraught with the same uncertainty. It took place during a memorial service the inmates held for a fellow prisoner. The memorial was held in concert by Christian and Muslim worshipers, honoring the unexpected death of Trice-X, a young African American man. Trice-X, 48, died on May 16, 2022, of complications from a stroke.

At the event, people gave personal testimonies of how Trice-X had positively impacted their lives. It was during this eulogy that I saw something amazing. I witnessed the mold of toxic masculinity being shattered, which for me was a welcomed and beautiful sight.

It was beautiful because these incarcerated individuals became counter-cultural. They pushed against the prison culture of toxic masculinity. A culture that not only forces incarcerated individuals to be cold and calculating with their emotions, but also enforces a mindset that one has to be the biggest, strongest, baddest person on the prison yard.

Trice-X's memorial shattered the mold of toxic masculinity because it showed strong men encouraging other men to mourn and cry. I was honored to see a group of diverse men, who normally would not associate with one another because of cultural and religious differences, lean on each other for emotional support. They allowed

themselves to not only bridge the gap between one another, but also to be vulnerable in front each other, expressing to the community tears of sorrow, tears of happiness, and tears of absence. What a courageous sight to witness.

As I sat there absorbing everything, I began to think how much better off incarcerated men would be if we had the courage to strip away any forms of toxic masculinity within the prison culture. How much easier it would be for us to coexist with each other. How much healthier it would be to rely on one another for emotional support, especially when dealing with certain, devastating news. And finally, learning to deal with the pain of facing a divorce, the agony of losing a loved one, or any other emotional trauma.

I think about whether Josh would still be alive today if he'd had someone to walk along side of him in his grief, to be open and empathic to his hurt and pain. I wonder how many other men would still be alive if they felt free enough to shed tears alongside someone who was there for them. In the end, I wonder where I would be if I had continued living in the toxicity of "prison culture," instead of surrounding myself with like-minded individuals who are not afraid to feel.

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“Hole in My Heart”By **DAVID WHEETLEY**

“Hole in my heart” are the words that hit me with the same force and impact as the judge telling me that I would die in prison. These words were not read in a novel or heard as dialogue in a movie. These were the words that my daughter wrote to me after 20 years of no communication.

To say that I was stunned to read those words would be an understatement; they hurt me to my core. Her letter forced me to confront the perversion of what serving a life sentence does mentally, not only to me, but to the people that love and care for us—even when we think we have been forgotten.

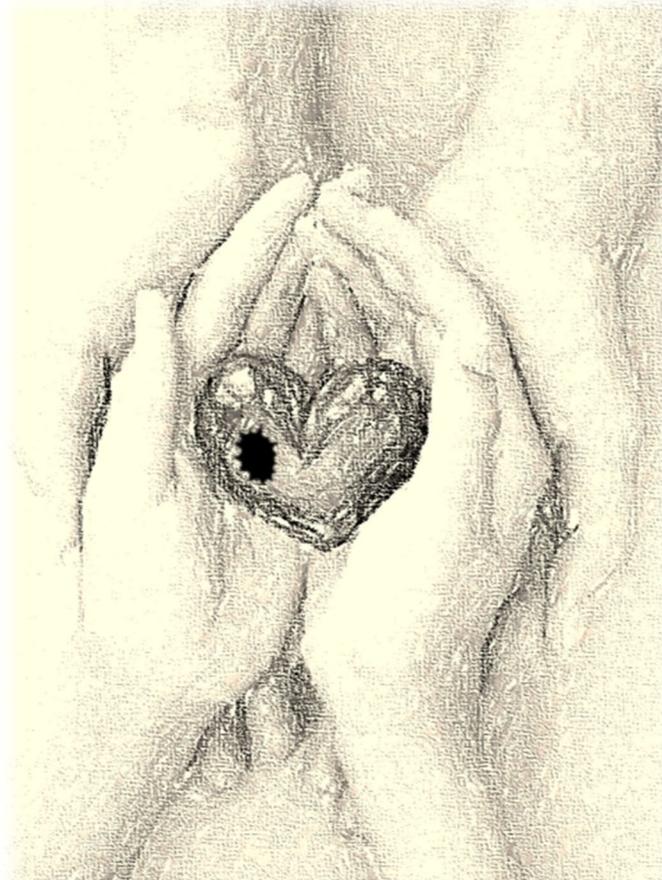
This is what a life sentence does, it makes you a stranger to your own family. It effectively alienates you from those you love most. How can I reconcile decades of lost years with an “I’m sorry” for the hole in your heart I created? Can an overpriced phone call, a JPay email—that may take days to receive—or a two-hour visit wearing a Covid implemented face mask, begin to fill that hole?

The answer is no, because the reality is, I am still far away, serving my life sentence. No matter what is said, the inescapable reality is that I will probably die in prison. This means I could never truly be a part of someone's life. I may hear about

a wedding or major accomplishment, but I won't be there to hear my daughter sing her favorite song, or taste what she cooked for dinner, or tighten the seat belt when she drives off. The little things are what causes holes to open in hearts.

I never taught my daughter how to ride a bike, cheered for her at her volleyball game, or told her boyfriend to have her home by nine, or else I would be in the car looking for them. These missed moments cause holes to not only open but to never properly heal. The fact that I will likely die in prison causes unhealable wounds.

Serving a life sentence is a dichotomy of guilt and self-awareness. Wanting to be forgiven for hurting other people, yet, unwilling to forgive those who hurt us. Ought I to suffer indefinitely for the pain that I caused? I find it ironic that the people with so-called full hearts are the ones in charge of allowing truly changed people to die in prison, but the ones with holes in their hearts are the most forgiving.



The Reason Why Holidays Are a Necessity in Prison
By ARTHUR CAYCE

Even though I know the response, I am compelled to say it anyway, "Happy Holidays C.O. John Doe!" He turns towards me and responds, "There's nothing happy about being here with you." I shrug off his comments as I continue down the hallway, eventually passing by his partner. "Happy Holidays!" I say to him. Returning my greetings with a smug stare, he says, "People like you don't deserve to be happy." Even after all the years of verbal abuse given by the staff, his words still sting. Yet, I don't allow their "Grinch that stole Christmas" attitude to dissuade me.

My agenda is to make as many people as I can conjure up good memories. For me, helping a person forget, even for a few moments, that we are confined in a hellish place and oppressed daily, is worth the negative responses I receive. Although holidays such as President's Day, Memorial Day, and the 4th of July have very little significance to me because of my heritage (Afro/Native American) it is not my happiness I am pursuing.

In a free society, holidays are social events where family and friends come together, sharing laughter and meals. But, for some who are incarcerated, family and friends are not in close proximity, have forgotten us, or have passed away. As such, for an inmate to loathe a holiday, or rationalize it as just another day, is a way for some to cope with the pain of loneliness. And it is for those reasons I go out of my way to socialize with others who might not be as fortunate as I am to receive visits, or call their family in order to enjoy some time with them.

Many inmates also feel as I do. Understanding that for some, other inmates are all the family we have. Therefore, my friends and I plan each holiday carefully.

We save up money in order to purchase store goods such as, meat sticks, nachos, cheese, chili pouches, and tortilla shells in order to make a prison version of tamales, lasagna, burritos, and pizza. Usually, my group consists of 10-12 others, but sometimes we chip in extra and make enough to feed the entire unit (240 men). For us, the title of the holiday is not really important; it is the gesture of validating another's humanity and sharing a social bond that many don't or didn't have.

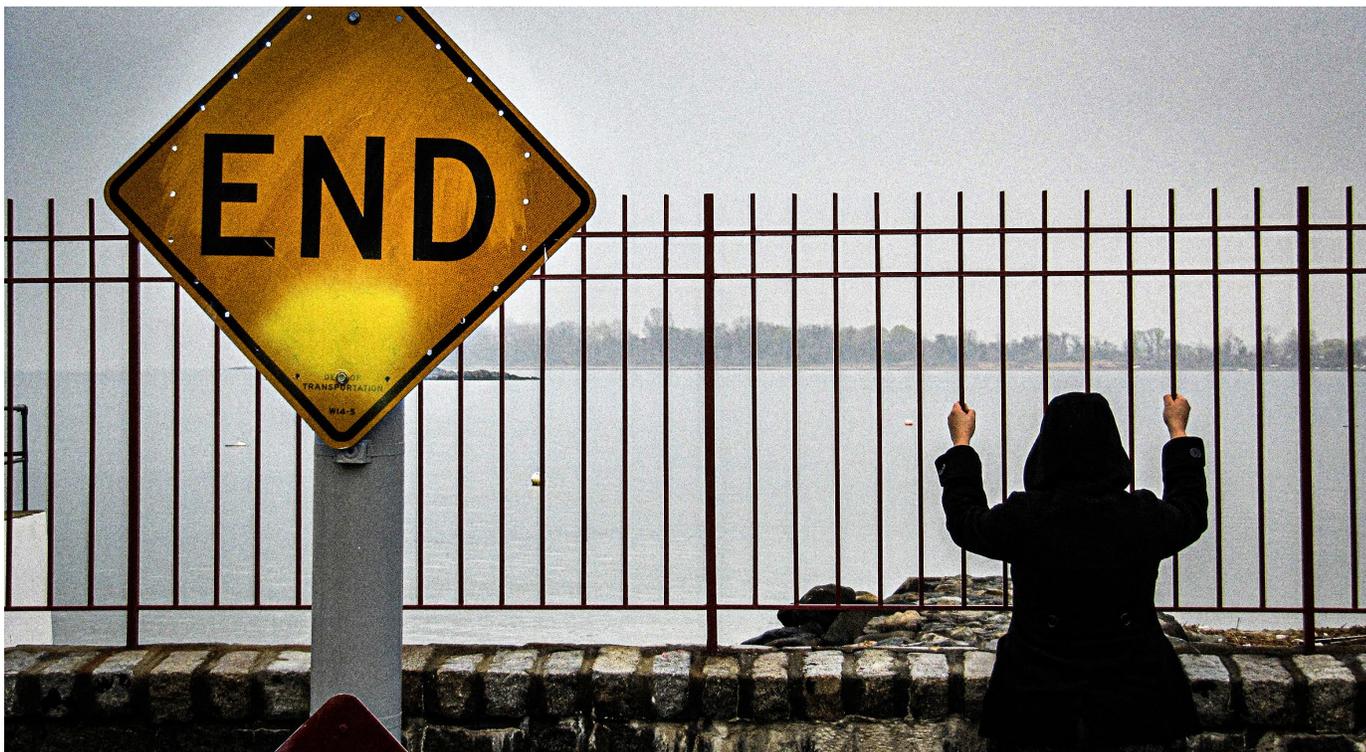


Building social bonds and conjuring up good memories are my main objectives when it comes to the holidays. And even if the store items are scarce, we find other ways to build those bonds, such as, playing cards, dominoes, sports, or just sitting around listening to music. We do whatever we can to spend our time as a group of friends and companions, investing in laughter and hugs, forgetting for a day that we live in a world of hurt and

despair. Yet, our mission does not stop with just bonding with other inmates.

A group of us volunteer our time attempting to bring a bit of happiness to those less fortunate than us. We spend time creating holiday cards, letters, or donating cosmetics to places like shelters for battered women and children, retirement homes, or centers for breast cancer survivors. Our efforts are to give a piece of joy to those who might never receive a card, visit, or phone call for whatever reason. We want those people to know that someone is thinking about them, sending them some love, and just as importantly, validating their humanity.

Therefore, holidays are a necessity for the prison population and not just another day. In fact, they are a day when giving is better than receiving, even if it comes from someone incarcerated.



The Lost Tribe of Michigan By **KEN UNCAPHER**

There is a significant portion of Michigan's population that has for decades remained largely invisible, inhabiting the nooks and crannies that we have banished them into, out of sight and mind, clearing our collective conscience. I am speaking of the mentally ill and cognitively impaired; those that until the mid to late 1990s had access to housing and in-patient care from state-funded hospitals and mental health centers. That is until a former governor defunded many of these facilities, forcing much of this vulnerable population, the ones without healthcare insurance, to fend for themselves in a world they could never quite understand. And when many of them found that they were unable to successfully function or even "fit" in a society that had already cast them aside, many of them found themselves in one of the other state-run facilities that Michigan will never close—prisons.

Interestingly, this was about the same time Michigan's prison population exploded. This same governor's term saw more prisons built in order to house the additional

offenders. I cannot speak to exactly how much of the state's prison growth in the early 2000s is attributable to a lack of available mental health facilities, but the number of mentally ill and cognitively impaired people that I have encountered during my 21 years of incarceration is worrisome. I have spoken to or witnessed hundreds of individuals that stood out because it seemed as though they didn't really belong in prison. Yes, they committed crimes, but many of these prisoners never fit the definition of "criminal," instead many often appear lost, scared, some even exhibiting child-like behavior. Which begs the question, would they have even committed a crime if they had access to adequate mental healthcare?

Jeffrey Gerritt won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in Editorial Writing for his reporting on the horrific deaths of pre-trial detainees in the small Anderson (Texas) County Jail. Previously, as a journalist for the *Detroit Free Press*, he pointed out that in 2000, prison medical care in Michigan was privatized and run by Correctional

Medical Services, a for-profit company. In 2006, he reported on Timothy Souders, 21, who was sentenced to a state prison in Jackson for shoplifting. Souders, who was mentally ill, died of heat exhaustion and dehydration after being strapped to a concrete table in a cell that reached 106 degrees for most of four days. He did not receive medical or psychiatric care.

In 2014, Kenneth Dalstra, 40, diagnosed with schizophrenia, died of polydipsia, defined as excessive thirst, at Handlon Correctional Facility. His family sued the state Department of Corrections (MDOC) and received a \$1.1 million out-of-court settlement.

Reporting, like that of Gerritt, and Dalstra's death has shed light on the problem of the mentally ill population in prison, not only in Michigan but throughout the country. Often, these people are viewed as easy targets during their incarceration, especially if they are forced to live in general population. Granted, there is one facility, Woodland Center Correctional Facility at Whitmore Lake, designated solely for the mentally ill and cognitively impaired but throughout Michigan's 30-odd prisons, the vast majority of this vulnerable population are thrust into a world of senseless violence, further dehumanization, and opportunistic predators.

In my opinion, the prison terms of these men and women are a living hell compared to the rest of

incarcerated individuals. The coagment of their naiveté, their inability to understand this volatile environment, coupled with opportunistic prisoners and poorly trained staff usually results in unbearable indignities, making their punishment far greater than the average prisoner. And despite available programming, once they are released, they are yet again thrown back into a confusing world that they have never been able to

function in; returning to a society that has already cast them aside more than once.

Admittedly, Michigan's prison population has seen a decline from a high of 51,515 in 2006 to 33,635 in 2021. But throughout the past two decades, I have watched many of these men struggle to find a place to live before they were released and I'd speculate that finding employment may have seemed an insurmountable task for them as well. But what choice do they have? How many will commit another crime?

The revolving door of incarceration, for most prisoners, can be avoided when they have a place to live, a job waiting for them, and a support system in place. Yet, for many

of the mentally ill and cognitively impaired, these things are only a dream. This small tribe of wandering nomads, trekking the desert of our justice system, are stuck in a revolving door within a revolving door of the greater part of society. Many of them are unaware and yet not entirely inculpable, but under the present system of incarceration in Michigan, too many are still left behind.



Prison House Chocolate Pie

Ingredients:

2 - cups of milk
1 - cup of sugar
1 - 9 oz. bag of Swiss Miss Hot Cocoa
2 - 14 oz. bags of chocolate cream cookies
1 - 16 oz. bag of vanilla wafers
6 oz. of butter

Recipe makes two pies.

Cooking Directions:

The crust

To make the crust you take the 16 oz. vanilla wafers and crush them to a fine powder mix. Pour the powder mixture into a microwavable bowl and mix with 6 oz. of butter until the mixture forms into a dough-like consistency. Split dough into two equal parts and place each in a microwaveable bowl. Spread the dough mixture evenly into the bottom of the bowl to form a crust. Microwave mixture until dry.

Be careful not to overcook this process, otherwise the crust could burn - so pay attention!

The filling

Crush the chocolate cream cookies into chunks. The cookies do not have to be perfectly crushed, just make sure they are broken into pieces. In a separate bowl, add milk and sugar and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Heat mixture until hot. Once hot, add the Swiss Miss and stir until the mixture has dissolved. Heat again until the mixture is hot. Make sure not to boil.

Once mixture is hot, add the chocolate cream cookies to the mix and cook for a few minutes until the you see the cookies congeal. Once you notice the cookies congealing pull the mixture out of the microwave and stir together. Put back into microwave and heat again until the mixture begins to thicken. Repeat this process until the mixture turns into a dough-like texture.

Once the mixture turns into a dough-like texture pour half into one bowl with the crust and the other half in the other. Smooth it out. Tap the bowl on a hard surface to eliminate any air pockets. Let rest and cool for 2 hours before eating.

Alternatives:

For people who enjoy mint chocolate, you can add a bag of Star-lite Mints to the batter mixture. Just make sure that you crush the mints thoroughly before adding to mixture.

For people who like chocolate, and prefer lemon, you can substitute the Swiss Miss Cocoa with lemon drink, the chocolate cream cookies for lemon cream cookies and follow the same process. This pie is a cross between a Mousse/Jello/Cheesecake pie.

Origin of recipe:

The pie recipe was created by Robert Horton, known by his friends as Bob. Bob stated "It was a mere accident making this pie. What I was trying to do was make fudge. However, I botched the fudge, but in the process created my pie recipe." Bob continues, that "out of the 14 years I've been incarcerated, I've been making the pie for seven years now," and "people love it when I make it for them."



Serving a Life Without Parole Sentence for a Crime You Did Not Commit

Interview By **RENÉ F. RODRÍGUEZ**

I have often heard many incarcerated individuals claim they are innocent; full disclosure, I was one of those. While it is true, I claimed innocence, the reality is I am guilty of my crime. Coming to terms with my guilt allowed me to accept responsibility, serving as a gateway to remorse. Deeply processing what I had done led me on a path of ethical transformation to make sure that I would never again commit a crime against humanity.



(L-R) Exonerated brothers Melvin and George DeJesus.
Photo courtesy of the Detroit Free Press

Although the genesis of my ethical transformation began with the acceptance of my guilt, the same could not be said of those incarcerated individuals that are not guilty of their crime. I met and befriended two such individuals: George and Melvin DeJesus, brothers who were recently exonerated after serving 25 years in prison. Six months after their release, they were gracious enough to grant *Views on LIFE* an interview.

VoL: George, how has life been treating you as a free man?

George: It's an adjustment, but the community has welcomed me back with open arms. I'm trying to rebuild my life, so, life is good.

VoL: What about you Melvin?

Melvin: Like my brother said, it is a big adjustment, but I plan to make the best of it.

VoL: George, take me back 25 years ago. Explain the charges from the police and what was going through your mind?

George: When the police arrested me, they told me that I was being charged with first degree murder, first degree criminal sexual conduct, and carrying a concealed weapon in the commission of a felony. Upon hearing those charges, I was thinking that this was ridiculous, then everything got serious.

VoL: What about you Melvin?

Melvin: I was arrested in the hospital while my daughter was being born. I could not believe that I was being charged with this crime, and I was thinking this was some bullshit!

VoL: Melvin, how did your family react to the news that you both were charged with a serious crime?

Melvin: Our family couldn't believe it, and they immediately said that we didn't do it.

VoL: Okay, so the police charged you, and now you go to court. Can you explain what happened in court that led to your conviction?

Melvin: Everything happened so fast. We were charged, had a five-day trial and after a few hours of deliberation I was found guilty of these charges. There was no physical, nor scientific evidence that could point to us committing this crime. I had an alibi. My conviction rested on the state's sole star witness who not only received a plea deal, but also admitted under oath that he did the crime. The state's star witness fabricated a story that I was present during the offense, which was not true.

VoL: George, do you want to add anything to this?

George: The craziest thing, is that the state took the words of an admitted rapist. I couldn't understand how this could happen.

VoL: So, after a five-day trial, the jury renders a guilty verdict. What happened next?

Melvin: We were sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. My brother and I were separated and sent to different prisons. I immediately filed for an appeal that lasted 12 years, which ended with no remedy. I began reaching out to people for help. I wrote everybody and everyone I thought that could possibly help. Eventually, I got in contact with the Michigan Innocence Clinic and the Attorney General's Conviction Integrity Unit, and they got involved. Their involvement is what led to proving my innocence and ultimately gaining my freedom.

George: The same as my brother. I filed for an appeal that also lasted 12 years, but got nowhere. I wrote to people asking for help. It was very difficult, but I did receive help from the Cooley Law School's Innocence Project and the Attorney General's Conviction Integrity Unit.

VoL: Melvin, before receiving help, and ultimately gaining your freedom, was there a time when you felt a sense of hopelessness during your incarceration?

Melvin: Prison is not a nurturing environment. Knowing that you don't belong in prison made life ten times worse. The food, the living conditions, and the treatment by both staff and inmates were at times unbearable. Sometimes I felt that I was living in a hell hole.

VoL: George, you want to add anything?

George: Prison was very rough. It made things much worse knowing that I was receiving a punishment for something I did not deserve.

VoL: George, what kept you strong throughout your incarceration?

George: My family is what helped me through it. I don't know where I would be without them.

Melvin: My family was my rock.

VoL: George, you and your brother were both serving a life without parole sentence. How long did it take for you guys to prove your innocence?

George: It took us both 25 years to prove our innocence.

VoL: George, what was going through your mind when that final moment came, and you were exonerated?

George: I was surrounded by family; it was the greatest feeling ever!

Melvin: I felt wonderful because I am finally around people who truly love me, which was my family.

VoL: Melvin, since your release from prison, and after your exoneration, do you have any animosity towards the prosecutor, police department, and those who were quick to convict you?

Melvin: You cannot hold any animosity towards anyone, but you can make your story known so that people know there are innocent people in prison.

George: No animosity. Happy to be free, happy to be back with family, and happy this nightmare is finally over.

VoL: George, what advice would you give someone who is innocent but happens to fall through the cracks of our judicial system?

George: Keep fighting, never give up. The truth will set you free.

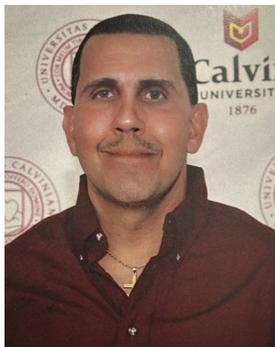
VoL: Are there any final words you would like to let our readers know about your experience from this whole ordeal?

Melvin: Live your life to the fullest because you'll never know when it can be taken from you.

VoL: What about you George?

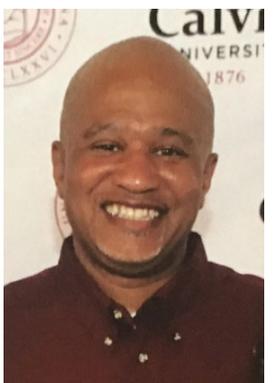
George: What I learned from this is that you have to enjoy the good times in your life, some moments are so precious.

VoL: George, Melvin, thank you guys for sharing your story. It is sad that it took 25 years to prove your innocence. Perhaps sharing your story will demonstrate the urgent need to look more closely within Michigan's judicial system. We need to learn how to better improve the quality of the court systems to prevent a miscarriage of justice from happening, especially with innocent people. I wish you guys well, and I hope that whatever remaining life you have on this earth that you are provided with the best of what life has to offer. God bless!



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

Rodríguez hopes to use this platform as a positive outlet for those serving a life sentence, giving them a place 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 punishment by opening dialogues to discuss its impact, allowing for different views with the hope of gaining a better understanding of both ends of the spectrum. Uncapher holds a bachelor’s degree from Calvin University.

Outside Consultant:

José A. Giralt, Consulting Editor

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Views on LIFE would like to thank its readers for sending feedback. The messages were encouraging and thoughtful! Here are some of the comments we received:

Hello,

I received your "Views on Life" Spring/Summer 2022 edition (Issue #1) and want to thank you for sending it along. I just finished reading it cover to cover & found the quality of writing & poignant content very engaging. I don't know how you happened to connect w/us here at MJA but I'm glad you did!

Sincerely,

Jack Wagner, Pres.

Michigan Justice Advocacy

Good Afternoon,

I recently received your newsletter Views on LIFE. It is very well done and an extremely useful tool to help dispel the misconceptions surrounding people serving life without parole in our community. ...

Peace,

Tricia Worrell (Director, Prison and Jail Ministry)

If you would like to send feedback, please email the editor at editorviewsonlife@gmail.com; your point of view may be published in our next issue!

Views on LIFE is an educational publication and is distributed at no cost to the reader.

If you would like to make a donation to help with operational costs, please email the editor at editorviewsonlife@gmail.com; 100% of your donation will go toward operational costs and no salaries will be collected.