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Please take a moment to visit our website: www.viewsonlife.org

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

When I entered my senior year as a college student, I began contemplating what my future would be as a college graduate serving life without parole (LWOP).

After marinating in these thoughts, a sense of purpose stirred. That is, a need to share not only my story and the transformative powers of education, but also the lived experiences of other incarcerated individuals who, like me, are searching for ways to shine a light within the shadows that permeate our existence.

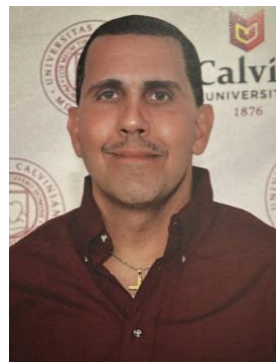
Driven by this goal, the Views on Life (VoL) newsletter was created then launched in 2022. Its purpose is to give individuals serving LWOP an opportunity to share their experiences. This provides a lens for members of society to examine the unique perspective of lifers. My hope is to shift the mindset that incarcerated people, especially those serving life without parole, are irredeemable.

That being said, publishing a newsletter and maintaining it as an incarcerated individual is not an easy task. However, with two staff writers—David Payne and Ken Uncapher, both serving LWOP—we were able to publish biannually. Sadly, after three years, it pains me to announce that we will not be able to produce another issue until further notice.

With this in mind, I am so blessed as Founder and Editor-in-Chief to have a loving supportive family that nurtures my drive and self-development. It is because of their ceaseless efforts, personal time, and a willingness to absorb all the expenses that accrues from publishing, that I am even able to have the newsletter. Words alone cannot express the amount of gratitude I feel for a family that is loving and kind to me. I am indebted to them for their belief in me and for always inspiring me to soar like an eagle despite being an incarcerated individual. I love them all for their unwavering support.

For the readers of VoL, thank you for being a part of our audience. I hope the articles you found within the pages provided insights in how people think, believe, and act within these prison walls. I also hope, in a small way, that it changed your perception of who we are. It was our honor to share a conversational space with you. Now, I encourage you to please follow me on my website (viewsonlife.org) where you can learn about some of the positive things I continue to do. Occasionally, I will blog about a variety of issues I feel passionate about.

Thank you and God bless!



René F. Rodríguez
Founder and Editor-in-Chief

**Letter from
DAVID UHURU PAYNE**

To all the Views on Life readers,

For the time being Views on Life (VoL) will go on hiatus as a publication. However, we will continue our individual efforts to gain support for more humane sentencing structures. The work goes on and is too important to be put on pause.

I've enjoyed and appreciated all the work put in by the VoL editor-in-chief, designers, and consulting editors.

It has been personally rewarding to have made this contribution to society.

I look forward to the day when Michigan breaks its addiction to destructive sentencing practices and becomes a restorative justice state. Let's all keep working toward these goals from the kitchen table to the public square, and on to the halls of political power.

May the Lord our God bless you and yours always.



David Uhuru Payne
VoL Staff Writer

**Letter from
KEN UNCAPHER**

To all the Views on Life readers,

Thank you for your support of Views on Life (VoL) and in your efforts to bring about some positive change to the justice system.

Unfortunately, the politicians who promised change (or the ones we hoped would bring about that change) failed to do anything. I hope that this next session will be different, but hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can make you see a world that does not exist.

I hope that politicians like Karen Whitsett, who could have helped pass the only possible positive change we have seen to the justice system in decades, can look the families of her Detroit constituents in their faces and tell them to keep hoping.

I hope some reader of VoL has seen that prisoners serving life do not always deserve a death sentence. I hope that we will see a shift away from a punitive carceral system to one of real rehabilitation.

I hope.



Ken Uncapher
VoL Staff Writer

Poem by ALLEN CHISOM

Poet's note: A reflection on the process of letting go of who you think you are in order to make room for who the Creator intends you to be.

My Cup Runneth Over

God has revealed his face to the men of Muskegon Correctional Facility in the image and body of Hope College & Western Theological Seminary whose staff has sojourned into the depths of this solemn abyss to bring a forgotten people the knowledge of books and more significantly—the knowledge of God.

These benevolent men and women want to fill our cups with the "fruit of the Spirit."

We desperately want someone to pour into us.
Here's the thing...

Our cups already runneth over.

Sadly, they are overflowing with unresolved childhood trauma, toxic masculinity passed down generationally, neglect from those who were supposed to guide us, abuse of all kinds, misconceptions of the world beyond us, self-hatred, inherited prejudices, regret from past failures and hopelessness for a better tomorrow—you know, the good stuff.

Sure, we would like to get some of what you're offering: a double shot of goodness & faith on the rocks of peace & justice.

But what about what's in our cups already?
We can't just pour it out, can we?

I've been trying but nothing seems to work.
Once I tilted my cup and emptied the contents into the ground but they just came back through the water.

I tried sharing some with my neighbors but only found that their cups were just as full as mine.

I tried giving it to the preacher man but he wanted me to write a check first.

I know I need to empty my cup but I don't know how.

Maybe you can help ...

Allow us a safe space to discard our emotional waste.

Take some back to your place,
just to let your friends taste.

Only then can they begin to comprehend what has been making us so sick and why some medicine just won't stick.

Perhaps that might inspire some empathy and compassion for the lives we've wrecked...no longer separating cause from effect.

I'm thinking that after one taste they'll no longer debase our humanity, they'll see the depravity in denying us the opportunity to become whole again — or for the first time.

Wishful thinking, I know.

We won't wait on them to acknowledge our pain, nor shall we further complain.

Fill our cups, for we desire to have them filled.
But bear with us, we still have so much garbage in our systems, toxins coursing through our veins. I can still taste despair and depression on the rim of my cup.

The residual effects will undoubtedly take some time to purge.

Nevertheless, thanks to you,
My Cup Runneth Over, this time, with HOPE!



Hope for the First Time

By SHAWN ENGLAND

After 33-1/2 years in prison, I have hope for the first time. Hoping is different than wishing. Wishing is wanting something unlikely or impossible; I wish I could change the past. Hope is the reasonable expectation that something will occur. People can hope for many things, most people in prison hope to get out. Others hope to be a positive influence in their community. And to be honest, some people hope just to fulfill their baser wants. For many people with a sentence of life without parole (LWOP), there is very little for which to hope.

For the past three and half decades I have lived under a sentence of LWOP; hence, my own experience with no hope. On June 25, 2024, due to a change in the law, I was resentenced to 35 to 60 years in prison. Because my crime occurred in 1990, I am eligible for disciplinary credits. That means that as of this moment, as I sit here writing, my earliest release date was October 31, 2018. I went from believing that I was going to die in prison to being 6 years past the time I should have been released. There is something bizarre about that, a Daliesque feel of the strange and surreal.

I sit here writing as I wait for the parole board to come and interview me. I am fairly confident that I have done all that I can do to earn a parole. In fact, my life before I had any hope of release was the model for someone seeking parole. I am 20 years misconduct-free, and I have earned both an associate degree and a Bachelor of Arts. I have completed the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) cognitive/behavioral programming, and I have dedicated my life to helping others. And yet a LWOP sentence, by its very nature, seems to drain hope from the soul. This is not only my own observation, but it has also been made by the United States Supreme Court justices and popes. The true evil of the sentence is that it precludes any opportunity for something different. Society has decided that I am a lost cause. If you want meaning, you must make it for yourself. As Albert Camus wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Like Sisyphus from Greek mythology, you must find meaning in pushing your rock up the hill. Lately, new scientific research has been introduced to assist the person doing LWOP as far as finding meaning in their lives. For people like me, Rene Rodriguez, Matt Copeland, Geary Gilmore, Ahmad Nelson, and many others, prison college programs have allowed us, men with LWOP sentences, the opportunity to better ourselves and help those around us.

Helping others is what many people who live with similar sentences do. Sometimes the help is given informally on the prison yard or in the housing unit, at other times the help is given with the acknowledgement of the MDOC in mentoring programs like Chance for Life or Breaking the Chains. In every case, it is most often the people who have no hope of ever getting out who dedicate themselves to uplifting their fellow man and try to instill hope in others. I cannot explain why this is the case, I just know that it is. Now that I have hope again, I am trying to figure out ways that I can continue to assist the men who dedicate themselves to others as they persevere with the soul-crushing weight of LWOP hanging over them.

If I could hope for one outcome from this short article it is that it inspires and motivates others to offer hope to someone. Reach out to someone who may seem to lack hope. Maybe you need some hope in your own life, I can promise you that hope is often found in helping others. Even when we may have no hope for something better within our own lives, living to serve others can provide that life-sustaining, soul-recharging hope.