

Article

## Doing “Life”: A Glimpse into the Long-Term Incarceration Experience

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**Abstract:** “Life means life” is a mantra of elected state officials who would rather spend already-compromised state budgets on increasing the use of imprisonment as a punishing tool rather than being viewed by their constituents as “soft on crime”. As a result of tough-on-crime initiatives, approximately 160,000 out of 2.2 million inmates being held in jails and prisons in the United States are serving life sentences. While surviving imprisonment is a challenge for most individuals, prisoners who serve long sentences—including “life”—have different adaptation mechanisms, and for them, adaptation is a longer, more complex process. Further, while persons serving life sentences include those who present a serious threat to public safety, they also include those for whom the length of sentence is questionable. In particular, life without parole (LWOP) sentences often represent a misuse of limited correctional resources and discount the capacity for personal growth and rehabilitation that comes with the passage of time. The purpose of this article is to explore the “doing life” experiences of a man who has chosen to redirect the focus of his life by transforming himself and helping others.

**Keywords:** life sentences; juvenile life without parole; doing prison time

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“Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3).

## 1. Introduction

Some consider the American prison system to be a means of punishment that serves no positive purpose and places the economy in financial hardship. Others believe the prison system is justified as it guarantees society protection from those who pose a serious threat to individuals who abide by the laws that govern. No matter what one may believe, the United States continues to hold the dubious distinction of having the world’s largest proportion of its population behind bars [1]. According to a study by the Pew Center [2], one out of every 100 adults in the United States is in prison or jail. Unprecedented prison growth resulted primarily from “get tough” legislation that decreased judicial and parole authority using sentencing guidelines, mandatory minimums, and three strikes laws. Also because of the racism of the American “justice” system, the numbers are much higher for people of color. Western [3] estimates that one in three Black men who never completed high school were incarcerated in 2004 and more recent figures suggest that one in every three Black males born today can expect to go to prison at some point in their life, compared with one in every six Latino males, and one in every 17 White males, if current incarceration trends continue [4]. However, the United States stands even further apart from the rest of the world in one nightmarish aspect of its prison system: the number of men and women sentenced to spend the rest of their lives behind bars. Despite FBI crime statistics [5] showing a drop in violent crime over the past decade, the number of people sentenced to life in prison “has more than quadrupled in size since 1984” ([6], p. 3). While the outside world relies on reality shows for depictions of prison life, there are many things that one does not think about or imagine until the imprisonment experience becomes a personal reality. There is no way to quantify what a life sentence does to a person so the purpose of this article is to give voice to the “doing life” experiences of a man who is living the experience.

## 2. Life without Parole: Adults Living “Life”

More prisoners today are serving life terms than ever before—159,520 out of 2.2 million inmates being held in jails and prisons across the country—under tough mandatory minimum-sentencing laws and the declining use of parole for eligible convicts [6]. The most recent figures mean that one of every nine prisoners nationwide is serving a life term. Among those serving life sentences in American prisons, two-thirds are Latino or African-American. Although most people serving life terms were convicted of violent crimes, there are many exceptions. Some have been convicted under “three strikes” legislation wherein the felony conviction is the overriding force for sentencing as compared to the level of violence, if applicable at all [6].

The rising number of inmates serving life terms is straining corrections budgets at a time when financially strapped states are struggling to cut costs. California’s prison system, the nation’s largest, with 170,000 inmates, also had the highest number of prisoners with life sentences, 34,164, or triple the number in 1992 [7]. It should be noted that the California prison system is also in federal receivership for overcrowding and failing to provide adequate medical care to prisoners, many of whom are elderly and serving life terms. In four other states—Alabama, Massachusetts, Nevada and New York—at least one in six prisoners is serving a life term. Seven prison systems—Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine,

Pennsylvania, South Dakota and the federal penitentiary system—do not offer the possibility of parole to prisoners serving life terms [7]. That policy also extends to juveniles in Louisiana and Pennsylvania.

### 3. Juveniles Sentenced to Life without Parole: The Nightmare Continues

The much publicized assault on “youth crime” has taken a particularly harsh turn with laws that allow juveniles to be tried and sentenced as adults. This means that some very young offenders face life in prison. Of the almost 160,000 individuals serving life sentences in the United States, some 7800 are juveniles serving life terms; and, among the prisoners with life sentences in the United States, approximately 2500 people were sentenced to LWOP as “juvenile offenders” [6]—in other words, they were under the age of 18 when the crimes they were accused of were committed. Juvenile lifers are overwhelmingly male and mostly African-American. They are more likely to be imprisoned for murder than are their adult counterparts, suggesting that prosecutors and juries embrace the punishment only for the most serious crime. Forty-two states and the federal government allow offenders under 18 to be incarcerated forever. Ten states set no minimum age, and 13 set a minimum of 10 to 13. Seven states, including Florida and Michigan, have more than 100 juvenile offenders serving such sentences [7]. Those sending the largest percentages of their youths to prison for LWOP are Virginia and Louisiana.

Prosecutors and representatives of crime victims say that a sentence of natural life is the minimum fit punishment for a heinous crime, adding that some people are too dangerous ever to walk the streets. The Supreme Court’s 2005 decision to ban the juvenile death penalty (*Roper v. Simmons*), which took into account international attitudes about crime and punishment, has convinced prosecutors and activists that the next legal battleground in the United States will be over life in prison for juveniles. Society has long maintained age distinctions for things like drinking alcohol and signing contracts, and the highest court has ruled that youths under the age of 18 who commit violent, personal crimes are less blameworthy than adults. Defense lawyers and human rights advocates say that logic should extend to sentences of LWOP. Further, in the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Graham v. Florida* (May 2010), the highest court ruled that sentencing juvenile offenders to LWOP was unconstitutional, but only for crimes that did not involve killings. How this decision may extend to juveniles convicted of a capital offense(s) remains to be seen. Nationwide, efforts are underway to encourage states to consider parole for inmates who have served considerable sentences, especially those who have taken part in life-skills, job training and other rehabilitation programs. For the co-author of this article, efforts are currently underway to pursue this legal avenue.

For 18 years, the co-author of this paper, Anthony Willis, has been changing while in prison. Sentenced to LWOP when he was 16-years-old, he virtually grew up in state prisons. Our chance meeting during a prison tour resulted in a long-term friendship and he was most gracious to agree to share his story. The manner with which Anthony lives a faith-based life sentence, in a setting where personal redemption is underrated and rarely acknowledged, merits attention. His story will illustrate that self-rehabilitation and personal change is possible for juvenile offenders living LWOP sentences. Considering the high costs of incarceration, it is debatable whether permanent incapacitation is necessary for LWOP inmates who have demonstrated they are no longer a danger to society. Also, for those who remain in prison, at the very least, there is a need for funding to create additional self-improvement programs for lifers.

#### 4. Anthony's Story

My name is Anthony Willis, but most call me Smiley. I am 36 years old and I am a juvenile lifer. I feel honored to share my story of what it was like for a 16 year old boy, who was sentenced to ultimately die in prison, to learn how to adapt to the prison environment and the challenges that lifers face while striving for self-improvement and reaching out to help others. Even though a Juvenile Life without Parole (JLWOP) sentence does not allow consideration for release in spite of how a person may change over time, I believe my story will illustrate the rehabilitative potential of lifers to develop into responsible and productive members of society if given the opportunity to do so.

I was raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina by a single mother struggling to raise six children. Throughout school, I never used drugs, received average grades, but felt invisible as I walked through the halls. In my attempt to fit in, I began associating with guys who had bad reputations but gave me the attention I longed for. My mother taught me to make wise decisions and to excel in school, but I gradually became rebellious and wise in my own mind. My aim for fame introduced me to minor crimes but in 1996, at the age of 16 years old, a single decision led me to be charged with first degree murder and robbery with a dangerous weapon.

February 1996 began as an ordinary cold and snowy month but little did I know that my life would become anything but ordinary. My desire to fit in and obtain the material possessions that my peers at school owned motivated my co-defendant and I to decide to rob a local Country Store that we heard would be an easy store to rob because of its secluded location. At that time, I had never robbed anyone before or fired a gun. We nervously entered the store with the sole intention of getting as much money as we could but instead everything went wrong and an innocent life was taken.

When we approached the counter, pretending to purchase some candy in order to lure the store owner to open the cash register, I pulled out a gun and aimed it at him. When we asked him to get on the floor it appeared that he was reaching for something and the gun went off. It all happened so fast. I do not even remember pulling the trigger, but I know I did. During this senseless crime, the storeowner was shot and killed. My co-defendant grabbed the gun out of my hand and followed with several other shots, but my shot was the fatal shot. I then jumped over the counter and stole the money from the cash register and fled the scene. No one was supposed to get hurt but my actions hurt countless numbers of people. A family lost a father and grandfather, and their community lost a prominent member of society and I was the cause of it all.

Shortly after, I was questioned by police and eventually arrested and charged with first degree murder and robbery with a dangerous weapon. After 21 months of sitting in a jail cell awaiting my day in court, my court-appointed trial lawyer represented me throughout my six day trial which resulted in a conviction and sentence of LWOP. That was the first time I ever saw my mother cry and there was nothing I could do about it. My co-defendant, who was older than I, was later charged and took a plea for two years in a minimum security prison.

## 5. Life's Prison Journey

The day after my conviction, I was handcuffed, ankle shackled, and escorted in a van by armed guards to a youth institution four hours away to be processed. Exiting the van, my stomach tightened as I viewed the 16-story prison surrounded by razor wire and gun towers. I was placed in a holding cell with the others I arrived with. One by one we were strip searched and had our personal belongings inventoried. I was issued clothes (brown in color), bed linen, and an identification card containing a seven digit number that would from that moment represent my identity.

Entering prison for the first time was like being exiled to another world. Nothing that I learned in school, jail, or at home could have prepared me for my first day in prison. The noise was deafening as indiscernible sounds echoed from various activities. The TV, card games, running water, debates between inmates, the intercom speaker blaring various announcements, inmates yelling into telephones, fans whirring, and doors slamming simultaneously created a fearful chaotic scene. All eyes were on me as if I were on display.

My previous reputation, status, or beliefs held no merit with the other inmates. The rules, codes, and ideals that I held onto in society were now non-existent. Everything was new: rules to live by, living conditions, and expectations from staff members and inmates. As a new arrival, I had to discern whether each person I met was being friendly or had ulterior motives (*i.e.*, food, money, sex, gangs, *etc.*).

During my first few days, I lived in fear of being beaten up just for being new. I wasn't as tough as I appeared to be when I was on the street or in jail surrounded by others who I had some type of association with. Now I was in a lion's den hoping they were vegetarians. I was placed in a single cell and remained isolated most days, just wanting to be alone in order to hide the tears, fear, worry, and feelings of hopelessness. Even though I chose to not speak unless spoken to, I was still approached to join a gang. A group from Fayetteville attempted to recruit me. The pressure was intense. I wanted the security but not the consequences. I remembered that wanting to fit in was a primary factor for my life's choices that put me in prison for life. I declined their offers by avoiding them rather than risk a conversation to say "no".

## 6. Life's Identity

From the first day of being processed into the prison system, there is a fight to hold onto one's identity. Our outward personal identity, that we once prided ourselves by, is stripped away. I was now labeled as an inmate and could only be distinguished by my inward character, but I no longer recognized that person. For years, I have attempted to hide my true identity because I didn't like what I saw. I thought of myself as weak, inferior, unintelligent, and an outsider. The boy who used to babysit for the neighbors and visited the elderly in a nursing home was masked in portraying someone whom my peers thought I should be.

From the age of 16 years old, I was practically raised by other inmates. Those charged and convicted of a variety of crimes—and several possessing immoral and unethical values—attempted to step into the role once held by my parents. As a juvenile, I hadn't yet had the opportunity to learn how to build with my hands but prison taught me how to make a shank. As a young boy, my cooking

abilities were limited to microwaveable meals and pop tarts, but since then I have learned how to make prison wine. This was not the path to rehabilitation.

I was at a crossroad and had a life altering decision to make which would govern the duration of my prison experience: to either embrace my environment and conform to the stereotypical image of an inmate or make a commitment to step out from the crowd and transform my life by redirecting my focus and investing in the lives of others. I chose the latter.

## 7. Lifer's Hope

From the day I was sentenced in December 1997, I have held onto the words of my court-appointed trial lawyer that we would fight the court's decision. Since then, I have held onto the hope of having a chance to receive a parole eligibility date. After all, the 2005 *Roper v. Simmons* court decision that would ban the execution of juvenile offenders was proof that laws do, indeed, change. Then, the 2010 *Graham v. Florida* Supreme Court decision ruled it unconstitutional to sentence juveniles convicted of crimes other than murder to LWOP. Soon after, in June 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Jackson v. Hobbs* and *Miller v. Alabama* that it violated the Eighth Amendment's provision against cruel and unusual punishment to impose an automatic sentence of LWOP for a crime committed by a person under the age of 18.

The *Miller v. Alabama* ruling provides Judges with the lawful authority to use discretion during sentencing. A juvenile offender will continue to be eligible to receive a LWOP sentence in certain circumstances, but the sentencing Judge will now be able to consider mitigating factors before making that decision. Since the Supreme Court ruling did not specify whether this decision was to be applied retroactively or not, individual states have interpreted it differently. Some states have applied it retroactively while others have decided not to. The U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to review a JLWOP case (*Montgomery v. Louisiana*) in the Fall of 2015 to resolve the question of Miller's retroactivity to ensure all juveniles serving LWOP are afforded equal treatment under the law instead of basing whether an offender will die in prison or not depending on the state where a juvenile was sentenced. The case to be reviewed is of a man who has been in prison for over 50 years for a crime that occurred in 1963. He was 17 years old at the time of the offense and was sentenced to LWOP. The Justices will review this case to determine if those who were already in prison at the time of the 2012 *Miller* ruling should be eligible for re-sentencing.

At present, most states have thrown lifers away and determined that we are beyond repair. As noted earlier, there are thousands of juveniles serving a LWOP sentence throughout the United States [7]. In fact, the U.S. is the only country in the world that is known to treat minors as adults by sentencing them to LWOP. As of 2012, I was 1 of the 88 juvenile lifers incarcerated in North Carolina. It seems that society wants to gather all convicted criminals and lock them away in prison in an attempt to purge society of crime even though no one benefits from funding human warehousing. I agree that convicted felons should pay for their crimes. But crime is not like poison ivy or the flu where if one person is infected it spreads criminal behavior and contaminates those in society who interact with them. Life imprisonment is not the answer for all who commit crime. While there is a need for a punishment system in our society, there is also a need to continue to believe in and provide opportunities

for those who want to be rehabilitated and lead crime-free lives. Juveniles who commit crimes are broken individuals and need to be restored. These determinations should be made on a case by case basis.

Over the past few years, I have seen glimmers of hope by the subtle changes in the law regarding juvenile lifers. Perhaps one day, not too far in the future, those who were once sentenced to die in prison may one day be given a second chance to become the men and women that we were meant to become before we chose a life of crime or, in some cases, made that one bad decision that cost us our lives.

## 8. Spiritual Life

In the early years of my sentence, I began attending church services more out of a need to belong and search for answers to my unspoken questions than a belief in God. I didn't understand how a holy God could forgive me when it was difficult for me to forgive myself. I learned I could have a new beginning and start over. That is what I longed for. I am grateful for three Christian inmates who never gave up on me even when I gave up on myself. They genuinely believed in me and who I could become with the help of God. They are the ones who helped me realize that I just needed to be myself instead of trying to be like others around me.

## 9. Adapting to Life's Challenges

At an early age, I was forced to become a man in order to survive in a hostile environment or be conquered. Below is an overview of the prison culture I grew up in and some of the challenges I faced while learning to adapt to life in prison. In spite of my ability to adapt and cope with incarceration, I continue to pray for a legal breakthrough that might offer the hope of a parole eligibility date in the future.

### 9.1. Living Conditions

Living peacefully in a dormitory setting, surrounded by strangers, is a facet of prison life that requires constant effort. The inmate population is diverse so in a single dorm, there could be convicted thieves, drug dealers, murderers, rapists, arsonists, child molesters, *etc.* The mix of personalities, cultures, backgrounds, and prejudices coupled with each person's unique emotional and mental scars is what creates tension. It has been a daily struggle to learn to tolerate the snoring, teeth grinding, talking in one's sleep, the awful smells of gas, body odor, and messy living areas. Privacy, by far, is underrated. Little can be done that escapes the eye of, at least, one person. Our showers—which are often taken with other inmates—as well as our toilets are exposed to the view of inmates and staff.

### 9.2. Lean Cuisine

We are provided with three meals a day. Although our food is often tasteless, cold, and unrecognizable, I am often reminded of the vast number of unemployed, homeless, and hungry people across America who would gladly accept the food we are given.

We are dependent on what is served unless we have the financial means to buy food from our in-house canteen (commissary). Inmates who don't receive money from outside sources or don't have an incentive wage job that pays 40 cents, 70 cents, or one dollar per day—depending on the job—must learn to be content with the meals provided.

Most facilities I have been housed at offer food sales through an inmate Men's Club. This Club orders food from local restaurants that have been approved by the prison administration, to sell to the inmate population. Pizza and cheeseburgers are my favorite offerings. These food sales are a special event that most inmates look forward to as we are able to enjoy authentic food that non-prisoners have daily access to and that provides us with a sense of freedom if only for a few moments. Then again, these sales are limited to those with money to purchase them, but most share with others who are less fortunate.

### *9.3. Health Care*

Health care is extended to all inmates. For the most part, our medical treatment is decent if we can get seen by a doctor. For example, at one point, I submitted a sick call form requesting to see the doctor and it took nearly two months to be seen. Delays are due mainly to overcrowding. As such, we use extra caution when we lift weights and we try to avoid rough contact while playing sports. Also, delayed medical care motivates us to devise home remedies to fight minor illnesses. Most inmates refrain from shaking each other's hands but instead greet by touching fists, which is called "dap" or a "pound", to limit the spread of germs.

### *9.4. Shake Downs*

Institutional shake downs are a dreaded event. This takes place approximately two times each year, depending on the facility. This is when the entire prison is placed on lock down while the officers and other staff members search the entire prison for contraband. The water is turned off to prevent potential contraband from being flushed. Programs and religious services are cancelled. The yard is closed and meal times are delayed. Every inmate is strip searched and have all of their belongings searched. This would be the equivalent to the police having a search warrant for a person's home. Even though these searches are authorized, you feel violated by having strangers touching and sometimes damaging your personal property.

During one of my more memorable shake downs, the K-9 Units and the Prison Emergency Response Team (PERT) searched us. Once we were strip searched, we were forced to stand in the cold without coats for over an hour while our lockers were being searched without our supervision. Upon our return, many inmates found their personal belongings scattered on the floor or tossed on top of their lockers and beds with little care. Some discovered that their possessions were missing while others found portions of their property—including legal mail—in their neighbor's locker. Without the thin line of respect that most possess for one another, events such as this could create chaos in our community.

I understand that these searches are necessary for security purposes. This, too, is a challenge that I must learn to tolerate.

### *9.5. Love/Lust*

Most lifers long for love but often settle for lust. Life sentences often hinder any hope of having a lasting and fulfilling relationship with a woman. A large number of inmates who were married at the time of their arrest have since been divorced; this includes lifers as well as those with shorter

sentences. Time and distance seem to have a way of severing relationships. Many lose faith in love and fall in love with lust. Lust requires no commitment, accountability, and often leaves little or no heartache.

Prison provides us with our basic needs for survival but fails to offer intimacy. Some men experiment with an alternative lifestyle with other men in an attempt to fulfill their emotional and sexual need. Intimacy is not limited to sex. Intimacy is also having a companion to trust, confide in, to maintain hope with, and someone to embrace for comfort, strength, and encouragement. Lust cannot provide this type of intimacy; it only brings temporary pleasure but leaves you empty in the end.

Sexual conversations are the leading topics of discussion on a daily basis. Of course this doesn't mean that everyone engages in these conversations but, as a whole, is the number one issue that is talked about. We, as male inmates, are detached from females for various lengths of time, but are surrounded by female overseers daily. A large number of attractive women are employed in male facilities. Many wear tight and revealing clothing that even visitors are prohibited from wearing. As a lifer, I can testify that it is difficult to resist and not settle for the temporary pleasure lust can bring.

At times flirtatious behavior sends messages of a potential relationship beyond the professional. Over the years, inmates have declared their love/lust for a particular staff member. This has resulted in segregation, being transferred, and even staff members being fired.

#### *9.6. Segregation*

Segregation ("Seg") is known by a few terms: solitary confinement, the wall, the rock, the box, jail, lock up, the dungeon, isolation, and the hole. The most appropriate title during my 28 day stay would have been "the hole" because that's what it felt like; a dark and lonely hole. During my 18 years of incarceration, I have received one infraction which carried two "C" charges related to misuse of mail. My punishment was to be placed in Seg. for 30 days, 15 days per charge. This was my first and, hopefully, my last trip to "the hole".

Being in prison is difficult in itself, but being in a prison inside of a prison has additional challenges. When I was first escorted into the Segregation Unit, there are no words I possess in my vocabulary to express the shame and embarrassment I experienced. I was now in the same place where I have encouraged others not to go. My cell was cold, dark, and dirty. I relived the reality of how one bad decision could affect so many things and people.

This entire experience was foreign to me. Being locked in a cell for 23 h a day with no contact was difficult. We were given an opportunity to have recreation for 1 h, four times per week, which consisted of being handcuffed alone in a metal cage inside of the dormitory. We were fed in our cell and I would daily wrap up a portion of my food to save until later. We ate our last meal at 4 p.m. so it was a long wait until 6 am for breakfast. We were prohibited from purchasing food or beverages from the in-house canteen if we were in Seg. for disciplinary reasons. I couldn't possess a radio and was allowed a 15 min shower only three times per week. Fortunately, my first two courses from my college correspondence program arrived on my fourth day in "the hole". This gave me a sense of pride in doing something productive in spite of my circumstances.

I am blessed to have been able to receive a 1 h, no-contact/behind glass visit each week from a dear friend. Having those visits to look forward to and receiving cards and letters from those in my support circle is what helped me through the most difficult time of my incarceration. Every inmate needs to

have a support circle to help them through. I thank God for mine. There can be none any more precious than them. Their prayers and support kept me encouraged.

Bad decisions come with consequences and Segregation is typically used by prison staff as a punishment tool for real as well as questionable infractions. Although being in Seg. was an experience I never want to go through again, it gave me time to reflect on my life, consider my future, spend time with God, and gave me a testimony to share with others who have been in “the hole” or are on the verge of going.

### *9.7. Life's Reflections*

On my 28th day in “the hole”, I was suddenly transferred to a prison 4 h away. After being housed at a single facility for 6½ years, I was in awe at the things I saw, heard, and even smelled. I was surrounded by ordinary events that I almost forgot existed. I saw cows and horses grazing in fields. I saw children exiting school buses, people shopping, pumping gas, changing tires on the side of the road, and using cell phones while driving. I could also smell wood burning in someone's chimney. That scent brought back memories of home. I also smelled a skunk that I could have done without. Witnessing these common events saddened me as I thought of all the things I forfeited and longed to experience once more.

### *9.8. Holidays*

Each year, events such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays come and go. Christmas takes the biggest toll on me and has the greatest effect on the inmate population.

My first few years in prison, Christmas was the time of year that I dreaded. All I could think about was what my life could have been and how being in prison affected the lives of so many. I missed the decorations, turkey, gifts, love, family gatherings, and the joy the season created.

When Christmastime approaches, there is tension in the atmosphere. Schools, programs, and religious services are cancelled for the holiday. Any interruption in the daily routines and activities, makes time drag along and allows more time to think about our families, failures, and the joys of freedom. Most begin to withdraw from others and sleep more often in order to escape the feeling of loneliness, sadness, and regret.

In an attempt to help reduce some of the stress that often comes with the Christmas holiday, I began requesting to be allowed to organize Christmas programs for the inmate population. Over the years, I have been allowed to organize concerts, talent shows, cantatas, and drama plays for Christmas as well as other times throughout the year.

My purpose was to use my talents to share the true meaning of Christmas, which is to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and to help the guys get out of their dorms to enjoy a program and take a mental vacation from prison; to create an environment where they can laugh, cry, and be free for 1 or 2 h. These programs have undoubtedly helped ease the gloom of the holiday season by providing some joy, peace, and hope to many, including myself.

### 9.9. Good/Bad Days

One of the major challenges of living a LWOP sentence is going through the roller coaster ride of good and bad days. I am called Smiley because I usually keep a positive and upbeat attitude and I smile a lot. Smiles are contagious and I think we would agree that the prison environment could use more smiles. But because of my nickname, I am expected to smile at all times as if I don't have bad days, but I do. There are times when I want to withdraw myself from everyone, stay in bed all day and, at times, just want to scream or cry because of the pressures I face as a lifer. During these times, I spend time praying, reading a good novel, exercising, and ice cream helps at times also. Even during my down days, when I don't feel like being disturbed, I have committed to never turn anyone away who needs someone to listen to them or share advice with them. This proves to be therapeutic for us both because often the advice I share are the very words I needed to be reminded of myself. Some may ask, "On your down days, who do you turn to?" I have, at least, one insider I feel comfortable sharing with. Also, I am blessed to have a faithful and loving support circle on the outside that I can talk to and lean on.

## 10. Life Support

As a life support system is designed to provide support in sustaining life to someone who can't survive on their own, lifers need to be hooked up to a life support of family and friends who will write, visit, and just be a supporting cast. Mother Teresa once said "Loneliness and being forgotten are the greatest poverties". Gifts of money are helpful but expressing love by letting us know we aren't forgotten about through a letter or visit is priceless.

My support circle consists of my immediate family and several dear friends whom I have met during my incarceration through church ministries, prison outreach programs, and former inmates. I gradually began to realize that even though I was sentenced, my family was doing time with me. Incarceration puts a strain on family members who attempt to maintain a relationship from a distance. Since my incarceration, my family has been scattered across the U.S. to pursue their life's goals. Because of the challenges associated with being located far from family (e.g., financial, transportation, *etc.*), I typically receive a visit from family members only two or three times each year. Collect calls are \$3.40 for a 15-min phone call. Due to the financial hardship resulting from the expense of telephone calls, corresponding through letters is our primary means of communication.

## 11. Life's Investments

At the start of my prison sentence, my goal was to simply survive from day to day. But, as I matured and others began to believe in me and the potential they saw, I began to learn to not only survive, but to live. Even in the face of learning to adapt to life in prison, and the challenges I faced as a lifer, my rehabilitative process had begun. As I began to surround myself with others who encouraged me to further my education by taking the few classes and self-help programs that I was eligible to enroll in, I began to view myself in a new light. Doors were opening up for me. I could now recognize myself and who I once was before I rebelled. As I share my experiences with other inmates, I feel like I am helping them reach their potential also.

My co-author will later share how lifers must work hard to rehabilitate themselves. It is a common occurrence for lifers to dream of playing a positive, redeeming role in society at some hypothetical point in the future. The need to pursue activities that fill each day gives us a sense of purpose. Other inmates have criticized me for taking classes and programs because I have a LWOP sentence. At times I would get discouraged. I've been told that I am "wasting my time". Now I boldly say, "We all have time to do and we must all choose whether to waste our time, spend our time, or invest our time. I'm investing mine." I want to prepare myself for my future even if it is a hypothetical point in the future. True, I do have a LWOP sentence, but if I am given a second chance in society, I want and need to be ready.

My faith in Jesus Christ is what sustains me and guides me to reach out to help others. I've spent a large portion of time tutoring inmates pursuing their GED and various other programs. I have worked with several people to help them learn to read as well as assisting others write letters to their families. Because I find pleasure in seeing families maintain their bond(s), I try to offer my support and assistance in helping inmates restore broken relationships with parents, their children, or others. I often counsel married inmates encouraging them to fight for their marriage and advise the unwed to ask God to place the right woman in their path, and begin with a genuine friendship. The majority have shared that they are looking for a good woman. I urge them to first learn to be a good man so they will know how to treat and keep the good woman they are introduced to.

Over the years I have gradually become respected by staff members and inmates alike. Often I have been delegated as a peacemaker and motivator in various situations and settings by both staff and inmates. The most difficult of all is reaching out when someone has a death in the family. Rarely having any words to say, I can only hope that my presence will be enough by just sitting with them. Encouraging others, being a listener, motivator, and a friend comes natural to me because it is what I needed to help refocus my life.

One of my ministries is playing sports (*i.e.*, table tennis (Ping-Pong) and basketball) for church services. I play 1-on-1 and if my opponent loses, they are required to attend a church service of my choice. If I lose, which I seldom do, I buy them some type of snack or drink. My purpose wasn't entirely for an immediate conversion, but to simply get those who are lonely, bitter, angry, and concerned about their life to a place where they would be welcomed with open arms and reminded that they are loved.

The programs I have participated in and created over the years have all had the purpose to help others prepare for their release or strengthen them during their stay. My goal has been to help them believe in themselves by increasing their self-esteem and encouraging them instead of tearing them down through condemnation. As society throws us away, I continue to share my opinion that junk yards are full of valuable items that only need to be restored and polished. Isn't this what rehabilitation is about? Rehabilitation means to restore or bring to a condition of useful and constructive activity; to reestablish the good name of. How can a lifer be restored and made useful when we are continually denied access to rehabilitative tools offered by the Departments of Correction throughout the nation and, in my case, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) that oversees adult and juvenile prisons as well as community-based supervision?

## 12. Life's Limits

As noted earlier, most prisons have special restrictions related to “lifers”. We are denied access to various programs which are reserved for those who will someday be released. On the basis of my sentence alone, I have been denied certain jobs, schools, and self-help programs. I was told they were reserved for those with lesser sentences in preparation for their return to society. I applaud the efforts to provide opportunities which will, hopefully, equip inmates with trades and skills to use once released. But it is also important that inmates with LWOP sentences not be cast off or denied opportunities for self-improvement as there are many who desire to further their education and participate in self-help programs offered to those with shorter sentences.

Over the years, my observation has been that many inmates who are close to being released are usually the ones who are uninterested in taking the programs and classes offered. Several drop out while others merely show up to receive gain time or meet a requirement for honor grade (minimum security). At times when students drop from classes, staff members will force inmates to enroll or select inmates who have already completed the class in order to fill their attendance quota. I am willing to participate with nothing to gain apart from being educated, but I am rejected because I am a lifer. How else will a lifer ever be able to “reestablish the good name” of who they could become instead of continually being labeled by our crime when we aren’t permitted to participate in these classes and self-help programs?

While in jail awaiting trial, I received my GED. In the first few years of my incarceration, I received three Associate degrees with high honors through a community college. My mother was so proud of me. Above all, I wanted her to know that she didn’t fail as a mother and that the seeds she planted finally produced fruit. Since that time, funding has been cut for many prison-related programs and the Federal government terminated financial aid for inmate schooling. But I am happy to say that, in spite of the obstacles, I recently received my Bachelor’s degree in Business Management through correspondence classes. This achievement was possible because of my support circle. They continue to believe in me, my abilities, and dreams. Without them, I wouldn’t be able to continue my education. But lifers are generally limited in our pursuits by the NCDPS.

## 13. Conclusions...Or Perhaps a New Beginning

If I was asked “How can you maintain hope or feel deserving of possibly receiving a parole eligibility date when your actions caused such damage in the lives of others?” My response would be: I am no longer the same 16 year old boy who made a terrible choice that forever changed the lives of innocent people. It has been proven that a juvenile’s brain is not yet fully developed and we have the capacity to mature and develop as we get older. It is possible for a juvenile to be reformed over time. A 40 year old man is not the same person he was at 16. A person who is violent as a child is not necessarily violent years later. Yet, offenders continue to wear the label of their crime regardless of the progress they make toward becoming responsible and caring human beings who strive for self-improvement while continuing to help others. While the crime act itself cannot be changed, many offenders are capable of change for the better. I believe that periodic reviews throughout a juvenile lifer’s imprisonment will show that as a juvenile lifer’s brain develops, they will develop as well and this will be reflected in

their programming efforts, institutional disciplinary record, mental health status, and any other indicators of responsible and mature conduct. The hope that I possess makes it possible for me to pass that hope onto others through my efforts to make a positive change in the world through the lives of others. If I were to receive a second chance in society at some point in my life, it would be one of my goals to reach out to wayward teens that are on the verge of entering the criminal justice system and share my personal experiences with them. If my testimony would deter even one child from going to jail or prison, it would be worth it.

Someone once asked me, “Do you regret coming to prison?” Without coming to a place like this I wouldn’t be who I am today. I am confident I wouldn’t have matured as I have. I wouldn’t have the relationship that I now have with my family. I wouldn’t have furthered my education or discovered my talents. Even more, I wouldn’t have come to a point in my life when I realized my need for God and His love. So, “no”, I don’t regret coming to prison, but I regret having a LWOP sentence and, even more, I regret the pain and heartache I caused my victim’s family and their community. The current suffering that I may face as a lifer is insignificant in comparison to the suffering experienced by my victim and his family. My actions 19 years ago continue to cause hurt and pain in the lives of the victim’s family and for those who knew him. I completely understand why victims and their families would feel betrayed and angry if the prisoner who hurt them or their family—and received a LWOP sentence—was to be considered for release years after sentencing. They have every right to feel that way.

The one thing that rehabilitation is powerless to do is change the effects of my actions on others. I realize that there is nothing that I could ever do or say that would repair the damage that I have caused. Due to potential legal considerations, I am not able to convey to my victim’s family how sorry I am and to ask for their forgiveness. But I remain hopeful for a chance to be able to share my heart with them someday so that they know the sincerity of my apology and allow the healing process to begin.

If I were asked “What makes you so sure that lifers are capable of redemption?” I would invite them to take a close look at my life. I believe that I am proof that a lifer has the potential to be reformed. How else can it be explained how a 16 year old boy that was sentenced to slowly die in prison, could find reasons to live and mature into a sane and responsible human being? After spending over half of my life in prison surrounded by inmates filled with rage, hate, racism, lewd lifestyles, and motivated by dishonest gain, the fact that I have been able to maintain my integrity, dignity, and a positive outlook on life is nothing short of rehabilitation in live form.

The hope of going back to court is bittersweet. It has been something to look forward to and hope for yet I am also terrified. Depending on the upcoming Supreme Court decision (*Montgomery v. Louisiana*), I may remain incarcerated indefinitely or face the challenges associated with reentry. Both possibilities are daunting but I remain hopeful that the Supreme Court Justices will rule in our favor by clarifying that *Miller v. Alabama* (2012)—the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that determined sentencing a juvenile to a mandatory LWOP sentence is unconstitutional—should be applied retroactively. If this happens, all juvenile lifers will have the hope of receiving a parole eligibility date and possibly being released at some point in the future. So, my daily routine includes ways to prepare myself in the event of a favorable ruling. I want to be an example that change is possible and, if given the opportunity, that I can be a trusted contributor to society instead of a threat.

#### 14. What We Know about Long-Term Imprisonment

“Doing time” is difficult for any prisoner. Prisons are tense, cheerless, and often degrading places in which all inmates struggle to maintain their equilibrium despite violence, exploitation, lack of privacy, stringent limitations on family and community contacts, and a paucity of opportunities for meaningful education, work, or other productive activities. But, Anthony’s story illustrates that “doing time” is particularly challenging for those who come to prison as adolescents or very young adults.

As a general matter, lifers come to see prison as their home and try to make the most of the limited resources available in prison; they establish daily routines that allow them to find meaning and purpose in their prison lives, lives that might otherwise seem empty and hopeless. In or out of prison, one way to ease the stress of daily life is discovering fresh ways to break up the monotony of routine. Life in a correctional facility is not all rank and file, mess halls and working out, though alternative ways to spend time are few and far between. Prisoners adopt individual methods of coping with and adjusting to the pressures of life in confinement while balancing the risks associated with quietly standing out [8–10]. Here, a long-term prisoner who aspires to accomplish goals during incarceration may be viewed as offensive to the administration because such a prisoner is not truly a prisoner because his or her mind is free. The administration demands that prisoners limit themselves to their functions as prisoners; doing time without attracting attention or disrupting the system. It is an environment where such seemingly effortless activities as holding onto one’s identity and sanity take on a significance of paramount importance. The resilience shown by lifers should not be construed as an argument for more or longer prison sentences or for more punitive regimes of confinement, but rather is a reminder that human beings can find meaning in adversity. Prisons are meant to be settings of adversity but should strive to accommodate the human needs of their inhabitants and to promote constructive changes in behavior. Serving a prison sentence, of any duration, is a life experience that cannot be compared with many outside the prison walls. Prison has its own culture, characterized by heightened alertness to attack and aggression, and a hardening of emotion in order to adapt. But, as noted by scholars, correctional authorities, researchers, and prisoners, the use of long-term incarceration as a response to crime has significant effects on prisoners serving long-term sentences and the strategies used by long-term inmates to adjust to confinement. The effects of long-term imprisonment have been well documented [11–18]. Much of the research has focused on psychological changes that occur during imprisonment and the detrimental effects of long-term imprisonment.

As noted by a few prisoner-scholars who have written about their imprisonment experiences [19–22] the psychological effects of coping with long-term imprisonment is a day-to-day existence: some days are better than others; none are great. The phenomenon of “prisonization”—or adaptation to prison through identification with the role of being a criminal among criminals—has been described and characterized by many authors [23–25]. Although controversy exists regarding the time course of this process and its continuing impact after release [26], observers generally agree that the prison environment induces a highly challenging lifestyle that requires the individual to adapt to a culture that is unlike any other environment in the world outside. We do not take issue with this last point though some prisoners express the intention to benefit from imprisonment, using their time to plan a better future. For some, the structured living conditions in prison may be experienced as a form of material and affective care that they are otherwise unable to obtain in society [27]. In either case, understanding how these experiences

alter the inmates' view of themselves is critical for the development of programs designed to meet the needs of life sentence prisoners within the U.S. corrections enterprise as well as interventions to promote successful re-entry [28,29].

While it may be tempting to dismiss the harsh prison environment of the past as archaic and no longer in existence in the modern day, many of the attitudes and practices of over 200 years ago still exist and inmates remain a disadvantaged group socially, legally, and politically. The sentence of banishment is no longer codified in the criminal law, but it is still, in effect, practiced when offenders are sentenced to terms in isolated institutions, often great distances from their families, friends and homes.

## 15. Doing “Life” Time

Prisons have real consequences for the people who enter them. When prison environments lack effective programming and treatment, allow for the persistence of dangerous and deprived conditions of confinement, and continue to use forceful and/or potentially damaging techniques of institutional controls, the people who reside in those environments are impacted by the harmful and destructive effects or consequences of such exposure. For short and long-term prisoners, the incarceration experience takes a unique toll. But, for “lifers”, the ability to manage the negative impact of such exposure takes on added significance. The added hardships inherent in a life sentence may take time to fully register in the person's mind. When the reality of the sentence kicks in—that they have been banished from the outside society forever—they are left to wrestle with the anger and emotional turmoil of coming to grips with that fact. Moreover, because most prisons have special restrictions related to “lifers”, many are denied educational, vocational, and other programs to develop their minds and skills because access to those programs is typically restricted to prisoners who will someday be released, and for whom rehabilitation therefore remains a goal.

For prisoners who are facing long sentences, especially those serving LWOP, there is a silent death occurring around them and within them that very few people talk about [9]. There is an isolation and helpless feeling that all prisoners have to deal with. Loneliness is a prominent fixture in a long-termer's life. It can lead to mental depression that is marked by sadness, inactivity, difficulty in thinking and concentration, to a significant increase or decrease in appetite and time spent sleeping, to feelings of dejection and hopelessness, and sometimes to suicidal tendencies. Another prominent feature of prison life is tension, which is so rife that it is worn like an extra layer of skin. Anger is yet another feature: an unpaid debt, a slight—real or imagined—a look, an unguarded word and it flares-up like a volcanic eruption. A person could well take a life or lose his/her own, or wear some hideous, disfiguring scar because of it. Those serving LWOP sentences may also be confused on how to make amends and reconcile to a world that believes them to be monstrous regardless of their accomplishments in prison and the sentences they have served or are serving. Rarely are these feelings shown in their fullness because they are internalized behind hardened prison masks. How does one grapple with a predicament like that and still feel optimistic? For many, they try not to think about it or feel it. As one long-term prisoner shared, “I can only keep it moving” ([30], p. 1).

Prisoners sentenced to lifetime incarceration present unique challenges. They often lose contact with family and friends, are subject to sexual brutality, must learn to navigate an underground economy, are subject to racial divisions, and lose hope [31,32]. But, perhaps a prisoner's greatest challenge lies

in their ability to change others' perceptions of them while incarcerated. Society's understanding of comfort, no matter how uninformed or naive, is only getting more insistent on viewing prisons as a place to efficiently house people we're equally afraid to identify with and exist among. Therefore, those we deem morally corrupt are locked up and fenced in; stuck in a place where no matter whether they strive for dignity, education, or an opportunity to return to a lawful lifestyle, it will always be easier to group them as a threat to people more deserving of the freedoms that come with time and space. The truth of the matter, however, is that individuals serving a life sentence are some of the most well-adjusted individuals in prison [8], tend to be the least disruptive group to correctional authorities, and are generally more likely to desist from future criminality due to "the duration of their imprisonment, the maturity they are likely to gain in prison, and their age upon reentry into the community" ([7], p. 28).

## 16. Closing Thoughts

The paradigm of prison as a place for rehabilitation lost public support and political currency decades ago in the United States. Most prisons pay nominal attention, at best, to improving inmates' skills and lives, regardless of their sentences. Concern about promoting successful re-entry is gaining recognition as an effective means of preventing recidivism but has yet to make a meaningful impact on the nature of most prison programs.

Prospects for rehabilitation are even worse for individuals serving LWOP. The sentence itself contains an unmistakable message that is never lost on offenders serving it. By sentencing offenders to LWOP, society tells them unequivocally that their lives are worthless, they are beyond repair or redemption, and any effort they may make to improve themselves is essentially futile.

Not only is the message of the LWOP sentence resoundingly clear to offenders, it offers correctional authorities a means to allocate the increasingly scarce rehabilitative resources at their disposal. U.S. society has instructed its correctional systems to invest in those who may rejoin society someday, and to disengage from those who never will. There is also inherent cruelty in denying prisoners any possibility of rehabilitation or reform. Nevertheless, there are many offenders serving LWOP who contend with the daily struggle to withstand the negative forces of prison life—drugs, gangs, violence—and work hard to rehabilitate themselves. One common sign of this drive towards rehabilitation is their unwavering desire to learn new things, however basic. Other offenders serving LWOP dream of playing a positive, redeeming role in society at some hypothetical point in the future. In both of these instances, the need for and pursuit of activities that fill each day facilitates survival in an otherwise depressing situation.

## 17. Where to Now?

A crime prevention policy which accepts keeping a prisoner for life even if (s)he is no longer a danger to society is incompatible with modern principles on the importance of treatment of prisoners during their sentence as well as with the idea of the reintegration of offenders into society. We are a nation that embraces change in various domains of social life. Yet, legislative policies effecting definitions of crime and dictating punishments for particular law violations continue to err on the side of punitive responses to such conduct.

On average, men and women serving LWOP in the state and federal systems constitute 2.5 percent of the prison population. Moreover, every life sentence carries a price tag to taxpayers of \$1 million [7]. Controlling for exceptional cases, we must reconsider how we wish to spend our limited national budget. Moreover, as noted by the Sentencing Project [33], imposing a sentence of LWOP makes an assumption that an offender will never be considered for release, no matter how old or changed in behavior. Experience suggests that many persons sentenced to LWOP, in fact, change substantially while in prison, both expressing genuine remorse for their actions and engaging in programming and changed attitudes. Thus, while the people serving LWOP sentences have presumably committed serious offenses, the imposition of a LWOP sentence does not take into account the variations that exist among those convicted of such conduct with respect to redemption for one's deeds. Because "LWOP sentences are costly, shortsighted, and ignore the potential for transformative personal growth" ([7], p. 30), we agree with the suggestions for change put forth by the Sentencing Project: (1) eliminate sentences of LWOP in all but exceptional cases; (2) eliminate juvenile LWOP; (3) prepare persons sentenced to life for release from prison; and (4) restore the role of parole [33].

There are great consequences of imposing LWOP sentences and caution should be used when deciding to impose this sentence. The growth in the use of LWOP sentences is linked to policy changes, not increases in crime rates. There are serious questions about the fairness and reliability of the judicial process that leads to the imposition of LWOP sentences. As a result, lifers include those for whom the length of sentence is either unjust or inappropriate. LWOP sentences, in many cases, represent a misuse of limited correctional resources. The facts are that we have provided our judges with limited discretion and inadequate sentencing options for them to effectively deal with cases. At the same time, we have a clemency process that has been neutered by a politically-inspired referendum. We can't complain about the cost of corrections as long as we abide by policies such as these. The time for change is now.

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### **Author Contributions**

The co-authors contributed equally to the research and writing of this article.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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