

takepart

from our series: **CHANGEMAKERS**

My Story: Why Pennsylvania Lawmakers Should Not Throw Away the Key on Locked-Up Kids

Is Edwin Desamour law-abiding? Check. Productive? Check. An asset to his community? Yes. All because he was given a chance for parole.



Edwin Desamour takes the microphone in Philadelphia to encourage kids to follow in his footsteps, except skip the going-to-prison stage. (Photo Courtesy Edwin Desamour and [MIMIC](#))

October 15, 2012 By [Edwin Desamour](#)
[full bio](#)

I am a productive citizen and a committed father who is working to [keep kids out of trouble](#) and our streets free of violent crime.

I am also a man who faced a possible sentence of the death penalty or life without the possibility of parole when I was only 16. I was convicted of third-degree homicide instead of first-degree murder and received a lesser sentence and served eight and a

half years behind bars. Since my release in 1997, I have worked with hundreds of young men, trying to prevent them from entering [the criminal justice system](#).

Five years ago, my colleagues and I founded a nonprofit organization called MIMIC (Men in Motion in the Community) to help youths who are in circumstances similar to the ones I came from. The kids respond intensely to [male role models](#). We believe that support systems need to be in place for these kids to prevent them from making decisions that could lead to the double tragedy of them taking someone else's life and ending up in prison.

[MORE: Life Without Parole: A Juvenile Injustice System \(Infographic\)](#)

All of this is why I urge the Pennsylvania legislature to slow down this week as it determines how it will comply with the June 2012 Supreme Court ruling that mandatory life-without-parole sentences for youth constitute cruel and unusual punishment.

Even though the proposed amendment to Senate Bill 850 removes mandatory life without parole sentences, the amendment leaves [life without parole](#) as a sentencing option for youth. This is a sentence that should never be given to a child.

Teenage brains have trouble handling impulses and understanding consequences. Without help, especially when they are surrounded by poverty, violence and chaos, adolescents can struggle to manage their reckless urges. Often the impact is minor, but at other times the consequences can be deadly, as I know from personal experience.

What happened to all those hopes and dreams, we asked? What went wrong? Then the stories began.

The legislature should not rush to pass new laws, but should truly consider how its actions will impact public safety, the families of our state, and our young people.

Pennsylvania has more young people serving the life without parole sentence than any other state in the country. All of them will now be eligible for new hearings, during which judges or juries must consider mitigating circumstances such as their age, history of abuse or neglect and role in the crime. I am hopeful that this process will provide many who were locked up as kids with a second chance.

I remember sitting at a table in the adult correctional facility with about six other youths who were certified as adults. When we started talking about what we wanted to be when we got older, our list was [the same as other kids](#): Doctors, police officers, businessmen.

We all laughed, and then for a moment there was silence.

What happened to all those hopes and dreams? What went wrong?

Then the stories began: Abuse in the home, drugs, [violence and poverty](#) all around us. We were all good kids but because of our surroundings we were not able to handle peer pressure and make good decisions. Unlike adults, children don't have the power to escape their negative environments.

I grew up when I was in prison. When I left, I promised some of my friends who were serving life without parole that I would never forget them. One of them was a friend from my youth and a codefendant in the case in which I was convicted. When we went in, he was a teenager. Now he has gray hair and is becoming a middle-aged man.

Before the Supreme Court's June decision, all he had to look forward to was an eventual death in prison. Now there is hope that he will someday at least be considered for parole.

I live each day with the knowledge that I was involved in an incident where a life was tragically lost. Nothing I do can ever change that.

But I have proven that I should not be judged solely by that horrible act. That is not the sum of who I am.

My hope is that the Pennsylvania state senate will keep this in mind as it considers SB 850.

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