



Commentary: The Forgiven

As the U.S. Supreme Court hears two cases concerning sentencing youths to life in prison, *Jackson v. Hobbs* and *Miller v. Alabama*, a mother and the man who killed her only son found reconciliation and peace after he served his time in prison.

By Mary Johnson and O'Shea Israel
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As we each prepared to enter the visitation room of Minnesota's Stillwater state prison for men in 2005, one from the visitor's side, one from the inmate's side, we were both nervous, and found ourselves full of caution. For each of us, the biggest question was: Is forgiveness possible between the mother of a murdered youth and the teenager who took his life?

That meeting was the beginning of a unique partnership. We have cried together, healed together, talked and listened together, and found that simple conversations can change lives. Together, we speak to churches, schools, prisons and conferences. Our message is that violence can be prevented and that it is possible to live with forgiveness, no matter what has happened to you.

We usually avoid the specific details of that night in February 1993, when Laramiun Byrd lost his life. It's too painful for any mother to relive. A 16-year-old killed a 20-year-old at a party, and Mary lost her only child. To be a grieving parent is the worst human pain, and we are both aware that healing and moving forward will never completely erase that hurt.

Unfortunately, disagreements escalate and lives are sometimes lost. Stories like ours are familiar to young people in our Minneapolis neighborhood and in communities like it all over this country. Young people sometimes find themselves caught up in situations they can't control or understand. As adults, we can make our lives as we want them to be, but for many teenagers, the negative influences around them are beyond their ability to navigate or escape.

It's important to both of us that O'Shea takes full responsibility for his actions that night, and he does. But understanding the consequences of your actions is something only an adult is fully capable of doing. That's why, when we speak together to young people about preventing violence, O'Shea emphasizes over and over the ripple effect, the many lives you hurt when you hurt one person. We've found that consequences are very hard for young people to grasp.

Many people ask us how it is possible for us to share the close emotional relationship we now have. The main answer is God's grace. It's also true that O'Shea, now a grown man who works, goes to school, attends church and performs community service, is not the teenaged gang member who killed Mary's son. Like all young

people do, he grew and changed. Now there is more than forgiveness between us; there is respect and love.

This week, when the U.S. Supreme Court hears the cases of Kuntrell Jackson and Evan Miller, the Justices will consider whether children who commit homicide should be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. We wish for our story to remind the Court that there's hope and the possibility of redemption for teenagers, even when a homicide has occurred.

A sentence to die in prison is an expression of hopelessness and finality that is not fitting when the person who committed the crime is so young, so very capable of change. Our story is one of hope, and we believe that when you're talking about children, there is always hope.

Nineteen years ago, we met in a courtroom. We were a mother feeling anger and pain, and a 16-year-old kid who was confused, scared and simply not fully developed enough to understand what he had done. The judge reduced the charge against O'Shea so that even though he would serve a long sentence, he would eventually have the opportunity to be released. Because of that, O'Shea served 17 years with an incentive to better himself and plan for a future outside of prison.

When we met again, as an adult man and woman in a visitation cell, we were able to communicate and begin to understand and know each other as human beings. Today we consider ourselves spiritual mother and son. We are not alone in this relationship. Through our work, we have become part of a growing group of families who have come together to heal from the pain of homicide.

A documentary crew recently filmed us; our story may be best captured by one simple moment where O'Shea looks into the camera and explains that he decided to meet with Mary as he was preparing for his release because he wanted to make sure he returned home a better man than the troubled teen he had been. That meeting began our journey together, and every day, together, we experience the power of forgiveness.

Mary Johnson and O'Shea Israel are community activists in Minneapolis with their organization, "From Death to Life."