

STATEMENT CONCERNING SENTENCE REFORM FOR LIFERS

GOOD MORNING, FIRST OF ALL. I WOULD LIKE TO THANK EVERYONE FROM THE JUCICIARY COMMITTEE, AS WELL AS ALL INTERESTED AND CONCERNED GROUPS FOR BEING HERE TODAY. IT'S QUITE AN HONOR TO HAVE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS YOU UPON THE MATTER AHEAD.

I WOULD LIKE ALL OF YOU TO IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT THAT YOUR 16-YEAR OLD TEENAGE SON CALLS YOU AND SAYS HE WAS ARRESTED FOR TAKING SOMEONE'S LIFE.

HOW WOULD YOU FEEL? WHAT MIGHT BE YOUR REACTION? IF HE ACTUALLY DID COMMIT THE CRIME, WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOULD HAPPEN TO HIM?

THESE QUESTIONS, ALONG WITH OTHERS TRULY REFLECT MY SITUATION. MY NAME IS JOSEPH ROMERI AND I'M CURRENTLY SERVING A LIFE SENTENCE FOR 2ND DEGREE - FELONY MURDER. THIS TOOK PLACE IN NOVEMBER OF 1978. I WAS 16 YEARS OLD AT THE TIME, AS WELL AS BEING VERY CONFUSED AND MIXED UP.

MY BEST FRIEND, MICHAEL REINHARD, AND I GREW UP TOGETHER. MIKE WAS TWO YEARS OLDER THAN I AND WAS THE BIG BROTHER I NEVER HAD. WE DID SO MUCH TOGETHER GROWING UP. I WAS ALWAYS VERY IMPRESSIONABLE WITH MIKE, EVEN DURING SOME OF THE WRONG DOINGS. I FELT IT WAS OKAY BECAUSE MIKE WAS THERE.

WE ALSO DID WHAT MANY REBELLIOUS TEENS DO, AND THAT IS SMOKE MARIJUANA, DRINK ALCOHOL, AND VENTURE INTO TROUBLE.

ONE PARTICULAR NIGHT IN NOVEMBER, AFTER A NIGHT OF GETTING HIGH AND INTOXICATED WITH OUR GIRLFRIENDS, WE DECIDED TO BREAK INTO AN ELDERLY WOMAN'S HOUSE. WE KNEW OF SOME HABITS THIS WOMAN HAD. ONE WAS THAT SHE STAYED OVERNIGHT AT A FRIEND'S HOUSE ON FRIDAY EVENINGS. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT THIS WAS THURSDAY EVENING SO WE DROPPED OFF OUR GIRLFIENDS AND MIKE DROVE US BACK TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. WE ACTUALLY THOUGHT THAT NO ONE WAS HOME, SO WE WERE QUITE NOISY DURING THIS BREAK-IN.

THIS NEXT PART IS THE MOST DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN. I STARTED GOING UPSTAIRS TO SEE IF I COULD FIND ANY MONEY. IT WAS VERY DARK ON THE STAIRWAY. I STARTED STUMBLING AROUND AT THE TOP. I THEN THOUGHT I FELT A HAND AT THE SIDE OF MY FACE. IF MY MIND WOULD HAVE BEEN CLEAR I MIGHT HAVE RAN, OR FELL DOWN THE STEPS, BUT I REACTED IN A MUCH COWARDLY WAY BY STRIKING STELLA BREMMER WITH THE BAR I USED TO PRY THE WINDOW OPEN WITH. IN MY MIND, I WANTED TO KNOCK HER UNCONSCIOUS. I REALLY DON'T KNOW WHY, I STRUCK HER A COUPLE MORE TIMES. I'M SORRY TO SAY THAT MS. BREMMER DIED THAT NIGHT. I WANTED TO GET HELP. I WAS SO SCARED I COULD HARDLY BREATHE. I PICKED UP THE DOWNSTAIR'S PHONE TO DIAL 911, BUT MY HAND SHOOK SO MUCH I COULDN'T DIAL. MIKE WASN'T MUCH HELP, BY YELLING THAT WE HAD TO GET OUT OF THERE.

THE FEW DAYS THAT PAST WERE VERY INTENSE. I THOUGHT ABOUT DRIVING MY CAR OVER A BRIDGE OR SIMPLY RUNNING AWAY FROM THE SITUATION. I WANTED TO TALK TO SOMEONE ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED BUT THERE REALLY WASN'T ANYONE.

A FEW DAYS LATER I WAS PICKED UP FOR QUESTIONING. THE GUILT WAS SO SEVERE. I FIRST CONFESSED TO MY JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICER, THEN SHE SUGGESTED I TELL THE DETECTIVE WHAT HAPPENED.

MONTHS LATER, THROUGH THE ADVICE OF MY COURT-APPOINTED ATTORNEY, I WENT THROUGH A JURY TRIAL. MIKE REINHARD HAD EARLIER MADE A DEAL WITH THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR A PLEA-BARGAIN TO 3RD DEGREE MURDER. TO DO SO, HE HAD TO GIVE TESTIMONY AGAINST ME. MIKE WAS GIVEN A 9 YEAR SENTENCE AND HAS BEEN ON THE OUTSIDE FOR NEARLY 3 YEARS. AS YOU'VE LEARNED, I WAS CONVICTED OF 2ND DEGREE FELONY MURDER AND GIVEN A LIFE SENTENCE.

I'M SURE EVERYONE HERE REMEMBERS WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE 16. EVERYTHING IN THE ADULT WORLD SEEMED SO CONFUSING. AT MY TRIAL I ENTRUSTED MY ATTORNEY. I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THE PROCEDURE.

I ENTERED THE PRISON SYSTEM NOT REALLY KNOWING WHO I WAS. I HAD A TENTH GRADE EDUCATION, VERY LITTLE WORK SKILLS, AND NO IDEA WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO ME.

I FELT THAT THERE WAS A NEED TO UNDERSTAND MYSELF, TO DEVELOP MY PERSONALITY, AND TO UNDERSTAND MY SITUATION THAT CAUSED MY WRONGDOINGS.

THROUGH THE YEARS, I'VE ACCOMPLISHED MANY GOALS. I DEVELOPED A GOOD WORK ETHIC WHICH ENABLED THE TRAINING TO BE AN ELECTRICIAN. I HAVE WORKED IN THIS FIELD FOR THE LAST 8 YEARS. I INVOLVED MYSELF IN COLLEGE EDUCATION. THIS SPRING I WILL TAKE MY FINAL REQUIRED INFORMATION SCIENCE COURSE AND EARN A BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH.

I HAVE TO THANK MANY OF THE STAFF MEMBERS WHO WORK HERE, OR HAVE WORKED HERE AT ONE TIME. THROUGH THEIR COUNSELING GROUPS, I HAVE DEVELOPED A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON MYSELF AND LIFE IN GENERAL. THOSE GROUPS, ALONG WITH PERSONAL INTERACTION, HAVE HELPED TO MOLD MY PERSONALITY.

BUT PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT FACT I'VE LEARNED WAS SOMETHING I DIDN'T DISCOVER IN A TEXTBOOK OR WIRING DIAGRAM, OR IN A COUNSELING GROUP. AND THIS WAS THE TRUE REALIZATION OF TAKING THE PRECIOUS LIFE OF ANOTHER HUMAN BEING. STELLA BREMMER DIDN'T DIE WITH THE DIGNITY AND RESPECT THAT SHE DESERVED TO HAVE. I TRULY REALIZED THAT MY DEEDS DID DESERVED TO BE PUNISHED. I HAVE ACCEPTED THAT, AND HAVE STRIVED TO MAKE MY EXISTENCE AS REWARDING AS POSSIBLE.

FOR YEARS I COULDN'T FULLY COMPREHEND WHAT THIS LIFE SENTENCE TRULY MEANT. MAYBE I SIMPLY COULDN'T ACCEPT THE FACT THAT I COULD SPEND THE REST OF MY LIFE IN PRISON. I ALWAYS HAD HOPE THAT ALL OF THIS WOULD SOMEDAY MIRACOUSLY DISAPPEAR, AND THAT I WOULD GO HOME. MY ATTORNEY HAD MY CASE IN NEARLY EVERY COURT, BUT NOTHING EVER CAME OF IT. MANY OF MY FAMILY MEMBERS, AS WELL AS MANY OF THE FRIENDS I'VE ESTABLISHED SINCE COMING TO PRISON, ALWAYS ASKED IF I WERE COMING UP FOR PAROLE SOON. MANY OF THEM FELT THAT WITH A LIFE SENTENCE ONE DOES COME UP FOR PAROLE AFTER A PERIOD OF TIME. I COULD ONLY EXPRESS TO THEM AS I CAN TELL YOU HERE TODAY THAT THERE IS NO PAROLE FOR US HERE DOING LIFE. THERE IS ONLY ONE AVENUE FOR FREEDOM AND THAT IS BEING COMMUTED BY THE GOVERNOR THROUGH THE PROCEDURE OF COMMUTATION.

IT ISN'T THAT UNCOMMON TO MEET SOMEONE INSIDE THAT HAVE SPENT 20 TO 30 YEARS ON THEIR LIFE SENTENCE AND ARE STILL HERE. I KNOW EVERYONE HERE BRINGS FORTH THEIR OWN SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES, BUT I FEEL THAT THERE ARE SOME WHO DO DESERVE A SECOND OPPORTUNITY AT LIFE IN THE REAL WORLD. A SECOND OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE WITH SOCIETY THE BEST QUALITIES THAT I'VE LEARNED AND ADOPTED. OVER THE YEARS I'VE BECOME VERY CLOSE WITH MY RELATIVES AND HAVE MADE FAMILY-LIKE TIES TO THE FRIENDS I'VE MADE IN THIS AREA. ALL OF THESE PEOPLE HAVE HELPED ME REALIZE THAT THERE IS SO MUCH GOOD IN PEOPLE'S HEARTS. MY FUTURE GOAL IS PROBABLY SHARED WITH MANY OF THE LIFERS YOU'VE SPOKEN TO ALREADY. AND THAT IS TO GO OUT TO THE REAL WORLD AND BEGIN A BRAND NEW LIFE. THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF THIS GOAL IS NOW KNOWING WHEN THIS WILL EVER BECOME A REALITY.

IT HAS BEEN QUITE AN EXPERIENCE TO LITERALLY GROW UP IN PRISON. I TRULY BELIEVE THAT I HAVE MADE THE BEST OF A TRAGIC SITUATION. I HAVE BECOME A WELL-ROUNDED, CARING AND SENSITIVE PERSON. I DON'T KNOW IF THESE QUALITIES WOULD HAVE EXISTED HAD I NOT COME HERE.

THERE ARE MANY HERE WHO SHARE THIS OUTLOOK, AND LIKE ME, ARE PUTTING THE MOST USE OF OUR LIVES. BUT WE'VE ALSO SEE THE YEARS PASS BY, AND THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL DOES NOT SEEM TO GET MUCH BRIGHTER.

I BELIEVE THAT FORGIVENESS IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF GROWTH. THE MOST DIFFICULT CASE OF FORGIVENESS ARE RESERVED FOR US WHO HAVE TAKEN ANOTHER PERSON'S LIFE. THIS IS CERTAINLY UNDERSTANDABLE. BUT THERE SHOULD BE THAT TIME WHEN CHANGE IS RECOGNIZED, AND WITH THAT RECOGNITION THE REWARD SHOULD BE THE SECOND OPPORTUNITY IN LIFE.

BY NO MEANS SHOULD LIFE ON PAROLE MINIMIZE MY ACTIONS OF THE PAST. THOSE MEMORIES WILL ALWAYS LIVE WITH ME. BUT I WANT EVERYONE TO KNOW THAT I DON'T WANT TO DIE IN HERE. I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE HAVING NO CHANCE OF PUTTING TOGETHER A SOMEWHAT NORMAL LIFE. IF YOU ARE THE PEOPLE THAT CAN HELP MAKE A CHANGE PLEASE LET MY TESTIMONY BE YOUR GUIDE. I REALIZE THAT THIS WAS SOMEWHAT LENGTHY, BUT THESE WERE

WORDS FROM MY HEART. THESE WERE WORDS THAT REFLECT BOTH SIDES OF THE ISSUE AND WERE WORDS THAT HOPE SOMEONE CAN REALIZE THAT THERE ARE MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE CHANGED THEIR LIVES INSIDE OF THESE WALLS AND SIMPLY HOPE FOR AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW THAT CHANGE.

AGAIN, ONE OF THOSE KIDS COULD BE YOUR OWN. ONE COULD END UP IN A SIMILAR SITUATION AS MINE. MANY ARE HEADING DOWN THIS ROAD AS I ONCE DID. PLEASE BE THE VOICE OF CHANGE TODAY.

THANK YOU.