

A slain child's mother welcomes Court's juvenile ruling

COMMENTARY

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A TEENAGER killed my 3-year-old son, Casson Xavier "Biscuit" Evans, during a drive-by shooting 17 years ago. Yet I celebrate the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision to abolish mandatory life-without-parole sentences for youths.

Casson died on Dec. 21, 1995. Raymond Johnson, who was convicted in the shooting, was 14 at the time. During the trial, I was fine with the prosecutors' recommendation of life sentence without the possibility of parole. That seemed to represent justice.

In the years since, my perspective has changed and I think the Supreme Court decision represents a huge – and appropriate – step forward.

Justice Elena Kagan, writing for the majority, said it's wrong that a young person should be forced to "die in prison even if the judge or jury would have thought" that his youth justified "a lesser sentence (for example, life with the possibility of parole)."

I agree with Kagan.

We consider their ages when we grant children the right to vote, purchase alcohol and cigarettes, or serve in the military. Likewise, justice should reflect a child's age and, therefore, allow for a second chance for all children.

We must not judge our children for the rest of their lives based on their greatest failures.

As every parent knows, children sometimes make poor decisions and fail to think through the consequences of their actions. I remember looking at Johnson in court and realizing that he wasn't a monster but a child who had made a horrible mistake. When I saw him recently, he had become a

man.

We had our first meeting in May. We spent eight hours together talking about Casson, what happened that night and what transpired in Johnson's life that led him to that point. Many tears were shed, and I talked about the power of forgiveness. Johnson has become a productive person in prison. He has earned his GED diploma and studied for a college degree. He has had no disciplinary actions in seven years. He serves as a mentor and facilitates group discussions. And he has become spiritually grounded.

I let Johnson know that I no longer want him to carry the guilt of what happened. I told him that I am OK and my family is fine.

I now have absolute closure. I am alive again, complete and restored. I am remembering my Casson for who he was, and not what happened to him that dreadful night. My surviving son says it's obvious that I have resolution and that my anger has diminished. This is huge for a mother to hear.

I know that Johnson, with the proper supports, could be just as productive if released from prison. I pray that the Supreme Court's decision will help us to stop giving up on our children.

Sharletta Evans, of Aurora, Colo., is a frequent speaker on forgiveness and restorative justice and is founder of Red Cross Blue Shield Gang Prevention Inc. She wrote this for Progressive Media Project, a source of liberal commentary on domestic and international issues; it is affiliated with The Progressive magazine. Readers may write to the author at Progressive Media Project, 409 E. Main St., Madison, WI 53703, or via email at pmproj@progressive.org.

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