

Ruling gives our kids a 2nd chance

By **Sharletta Evans**
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A teen killed my 3-year-old son, Casson Xavier Evans, during a drive-by shooting 17 years ago. Yet I celebrate the U.S. Supreme Court's 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. But 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 wrote that 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 Justice Kagan.

We consider their ages when we grant children the right to vote, buy 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 kids.

As every parent knows, children sometimes make poor decisions. I remember looking at Mr. 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 together in May. We spent eight hours 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.

Mr. Johnson has become a productive person. He has earned his GED and studied for a college degree. He has had no disciplinary actions. He serves as a mentor and facilitates group discussions. And he has become spiritually grounded.

I let Mr. Johnson know that I no longer want him to carry the guilt of what happened. I told him I am OK and my family is fine. I now have closure. I am remembering my Casson for who he was, and not what happened to him. My surviving son says it's obvious I have resolution. This is huge for a mother to hear.

I know that Mr. 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.

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