This issue of The Fire Inside is dedicated to all those amazing, resilient people sentenced as youth to outrageous Life and Life Without Parole terms.

You inspire all of us, with your spirits that continue to grow in the face of these inhumane sentences.

We commit ourselves to challenge and try to change these policies. We believe in you.

Speaking For Ourselves
Lifers Sentenced As Juveniles

I was 16 years old when I was arrested and I am serving 25 years to life for a crime I didn’t commit. I was present [when the crime was committed], and today society says if you are present you’re just as guilty. In a sense this is true. But tell that to a 16 year old thinking irrationally at the scene of the crime. Then tell them their life would be lived out behind bars, and there was never a chance to live in freedom again. This is me. How humane is that? That’s not justice. But I hope for a better future and want someone to hear us juveniles. If you lock us away you’ll lock away our future and your own.

I was 17 years old as I sat in front of the judge. That day changed my life forever. Everything started moving in slow motion. I could hear my heart beating oh so hard. The jury stated, “We, the State of California, find …” and silence filled the room as they said, “…guilty.”

I looked up, confused, mixed emotions running through me. I sat dull “no emotions being shown.” Which one to show? The judge starts talking. As he speaks, everything starts to move to a mumble. Until he said “I hereby sentence you to Life plus 25-to-Life.”

I’m 27 years old now. When I was a kid I didn’t understand what all happened. How I had to grow up fast.

These laws have to change! Putting children in prison for the rest of their lives is not the solution! Don’t lose hope in us, the future generations, for a mistake we did as children. Open the Gates of Freedom!

I am serving a 7-year to life term for attempted murder in the first degree. I committed my crime at the age of 15.

I feel it was unconstitutional to try and sentence as an adult someone only 15 years old at the time of the offense. I had no priors and was, for the most part, a straight “A” student. I had two co-defendants that were male and adults. Both of them had priors, yet it was said that I was the mastermind of the crime and that the crime was committed out of malice.

I do take full responsibility for my participation. I just do not feel that it is right to be tried and sentenced as an adult considering my age and lack of any criminal history.

I received my GED, completed a vocational course in welding, and work

(continued on pg. 8)
The United States is the only country in the world that sentences youth to life in prison with no opportunity for parole. International human rights law prohibits life without parole sentences for those who commit their crimes before the age of 18, a prohibition that is universally applied outside of the United States.

There are currently between 225-250 people in California prisons who received life without parole or LWOP sentences while they were juveniles. Forty-five percent of California youth sentenced to life without parole for involvement in a murder did not actually kill the victim. Many were convicted of felony murder, or for aiding and abetting the murder, because they acted as lookouts or were participating in another felony, such as a robbery, when the murder took place. In its 2008 report, “When I Die, They’ll Send Me Home,” Human Rights Watch found that 59% of youth sentenced to life without parole had no prior criminal convictions and in many cases when juveniles were prosecuted along with an adult, the youth received heavier sentences than their adult codefendants.

Significantly, these sentences are often applied on a discriminatory basis. California has the worst record in the nation for racial disparity in the imposition of life without parole for juveniles. African American youth are sentenced to life without parole at over 18 times the rate of white youth. Latino youth are sentenced to life without parole at five times the rate of white youth.

In the last few years, the movement to eliminate life LWOP sentences for youth has grown in California and around the United States. In California, The Fair Sentencing for Youth Act (SB 399), sponsored by Senators Leland Yee, Darrell Steinberg and Gloria Romero, passed the Senate by a vote of 23-15 but was stopped in the Assembly Public Safety Committee. However it will be heard a second time in the Committee and the bill now has until June 2010 to pass out of the Assembly.

Among other groups, The Youth Justice Coalition of L.A. has been actively campaigning for the passage of this bill, working with family members of juvenile LWOP prisoners to lobby legislators in Sacramento about its importance to the community.

Under the provisions of SB 399, those with Juvenile LWOP sentences who are found to have met the criteria would have the opportunity for a resentencing hearing. This would be an important step forward. However, each youth would only get four chances to prove that he or she should get a new sentencing hearing, and those who did would have no guarantee of getting a lesser sentence. Even if resented, most would still need to go before the Parole Board in order to actually be released on parole.

Nationally, the momentum to eliminate juvenile LWOP has also been building. The National Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Children tracks information about the 2,500 people across the United States who were sentenced to LWOP before they were 18 and advocates for the elimination of Juvenile LWOP on a state and federal level. They are actively supporting the current Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act of 2009, HR2289 which would eliminate JLWOP in the federal system, impose significant reductions in federal funds to states who fail to impose the measures, and authorize grants for the legal defense of indigent youth tried in the adult system.

And in May, the U.S. Supreme Court announced that it will take up two cases where juveniles received LWOP sentences - Sullivan v. Florida and Graham v. Florida - to determine whether these sentences could be considered cruel and unusual punishment.
Our children are incarcerated as well, confined, scarred for life. It’s amazing to me that the courts find every case a criminal case just to close it, make money, move on, not caring—or should I say careless. Our children face the consequences.

I still can remember 10 years and 5 months ago, my 7½ year old son with his little hand on the outside of the window as he visited me in jail, saying he was going to count to a hundred backward and when he finished he knew mama would be home. I cried so hard; he never knew I was catching the gray, white, black goose to prison for 36 years.

All his emotions became abnormal: his heart was cold, hard; he became disobedient; so many years away from his loved ones, living with my friends, finally with my mother, seeing things better. He faced another setback, my mother passed away, may she rest in peace. Again my son was mad at the world. In and out of juvenile hall—he became a so-called juvenile delinquent. In and out of boys’ homes, my son was doing time.

In my heart I knew I had to do something. I became closer to our higher power, God. I cried out again and again for forgiveness and asking for his help. I knew I was here for a reason, not the lie that the system told, I had to swallow what my stomach would hold. I believe in Karma, so somewhere in my life I hurt or did something wrong. I believe the Lord is using me for a lot of reasons.

My son is 18 now and in the free world. Today he understands better. We talk, write, and laugh about the childhood he remembers. Yes the scar is still there, but becoming a Christian in his heart, believing, being patient and giving thanks for so many things around and just life itself has helped us. Not many children live or are in the right mind to tell the ‘confined’ story.

On May 16th in San Francisco and May 30th in Watts, Los Angeles, over 200 loved ones and family members of lifers, former prisoners, attorneys, activists, and advocates, came together to share our personal experiences around the Lifer sentencing and parole systems and the many impacts of the State imprisoning more and more people as resources in our communities grow even scarcer.

The goal of these meetings, organized collaboratively between many prisoners’ rights groups including CCWP, was to bring loved ones of Lifers together to build a movement led by the loved ones themselves. While organizations and advocates can offer support, prisoners and their loved ones know the full impacts of the system on their lives and the communities they come from and are the people who will need to lead the movement for freedom for Lifers.

After brief introductions from the organizers and a Lifer parole workshop from Keith Wattley of Oakland’s Uncommon Law, participants broke into small groups to share their ideas for media work, organizing, and connecting to other Lifers and their loved ones across the state. People volunteered for steering committees to keep the effort moving forward. The excitement and urgency for change was strong at both events and it was beautiful to see so many loved ones of prisoners, former prisoners, and allies together building our power.

While all loved ones of Lifers are fighting for the freedom of their loved ones inside, the need for organizing together and larger changes to the Lifer parole system is clear. We will keep our readers updated as this movement goes forward, including a report-back from the third townhall meeting held July 18 in Watts, CA. Next steps include a fourth Townhall event:

Saturday August 8th, 11am-3pm
C.A.F.E. Info
935 F Street, Fresno, CA 93706
Contact: Debbie Reyes 559-367-6020

For more information on these efforts, please contact CCWP.
Desde los medio 1990’s, escuelas en Los Estados Unidos han visto un aumento de guardias de seguridad y surveillance. En 2004, el gobierno de los Estados Unidos usaba 60 mil-lion dolares por emplear policia y personales de seguridad en las escuelas publicas, particularmente en comunidades de color y comunidades pobres.

Debajo del imagen que estan haciendo las cosas para que las escuelas que sean son mas seguros, el estado ha creado la “pipa de la escuela hasta la prision”. Usando metodos de la disciplina que no toleran nada, arresten a los jovenes en las escuelas, escuelas disciplinarias alternatives, y detencion seguro mas marginalizar a los jovenes y no los de acesar educacion-en efecto preparandoles por una vida de encarcelacion.

Con el aumento en criminalizar a los jovenes de color y a los pobres por “ganga relacion” y poniendoles en la carcel por mas tiempo, el sistema de educacion ha desarrollado a estar parte del sistema de prision complex industrial. Las escuelas publicas estan cerrando porque no tienen recursos suficientes y numeros de programas educacionales estan bajando y en las prisiones no mas estan cortando los fondos de las programas de educacion y vocacionales. Las comunidades mas efectados por estos decisions son los pobres y personas de color.

La “pipa de la escuela hasta la prision” ha tenido un afecto tremendo en America, particularmente en personas pobres y perso-

encias y esperanzas. Muchos son inocentes de los criminles que le han accusados, otros estaban en un lugar equivocado, convenciados de un acto comitido por, por ejemplo, un novio abusivo.

Escriben que “Me siento que me han dado una sentencia a morir lentamente y miserable. Ellos di-

"Cuando tenia 17 anos, me dieron la conviccion por matar y me dieron 38 anos a vida. Pero yo tambien ha sido victimas, una victimas de sociedad. Desde mi joventud, la sociedad me creo, un nino viviendo en la pobreza. No estoy justificando a mis errores, porque yo se que los ha hecho. Ninguno de mis errores ha justificado que voy a estar mi vida entera en la prision. Por eso, hoy estoy danada, con agonia, pidiendo a mi caso. No por compassion, no por merced, estoy pidiendo justicia. Le estoy pidiendo que me de una chanza de ser la persona productive que quiero ser. No me mandan a estar atras de las barras por mi vida entera, por favor.”

Una sociedad que tira una gran porcion de sus jovenes, tira a su futuro. Dando a todas las person-

las una oportunidad a crecer es necesario para que la humanidad sigue desarollando. Que tipo de futuro tendremos si no?
Since the mid 1990’s, schools across the United States have seen an increase in security guards and surveillance. In 2004 alone, the U.S. government put 60 million dollars toward hiring police and security personnel for public schools, primarily in communities of color and poor communities.

Under the guise of making schools safer the state has created the “school-to-prison-pipeline.” Zero tolerance discipline, school-based arrests, disciplinary alternative schools, and secured detention further marginalize young people and deny them access to education—in effect preparing them for a lifetime of incarceration.

With the increased criminalization of young people of color and poor young people through gang-related sentencing enhancements and harsher sentencing laws, the educational system has truly become a part of the prison industrial complex. Public schools are shuttering down for lack of resources and educational programs within schools are becoming more and more depleted while the only funds being cut from prison budgets are the educational and vocational programs. The communities most dramatically and directly impacted by these intertwining social issues are poor people and people of color.

The “school to prison pipeline” has already had an extreme impact on America, especially on poor people and people of color, and many of our own members in CCWP. Increasing numbers of youth are sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) in the United States. There are currently 2,484 people in the U.S. serving LWOP sentences who were convicted as juveniles. On a national average, youth of color are ten times more likely to be serving these LWOP sentences than white youth. The U.S. is the only country in the world that still sentences youth to LWOP.

In this issue youth caught in this pipeline speak of their experience and hopes. Many are innocent of the crimes they were accused of; others were caught in the wrong place, convicted of an act committed by, for example, an abusive boyfriend.

They write, “I feel as though I’ve been sentenced to die a slow miserable death. They say prison is a place to be rehabilitated, yet there is no rehabilitation behind these walls. I can’t go to college or get the requirements that the Parole Board asks for. This is not rehabilitation, this is just pure punishment. I need help, not a life-long punishment for a mistake I made as a child.”

“At 17 I was convicted of murder and sentenced to 38 years to life. Yet I too have been a victim, a victim of society. From childhood, society molded me, an average child in poverty. I’m not justifying my wrongdoings, because I know I’ve made many mistakes. But murder was not one of them. None of my mistakes are deserving of my whole life in the penitentiary. That’s why I sit here today still feeling hurt, full of agony, pleading my cause. Not for pity, not for mercy, I’m asking for justice. I’m asking that you give me a chance to become the productive person I wish to be. Don’t send me to rot behind bars for the rest of my life, please.”

A society that discards a high proportion of its youth discards its future. Giving all people a chance to grow is necessary for the continued development of humanity. What future is there otherwise?
YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICES AND ORGS

Center for Young Women’s Development
832 Folsom Street, Suite #700
San Francisco, CA 94107
Ph: 415-703-8800 / Fax: 415-703-8818  www.cywd.org
Founded in 1993 by a coalition of service providers working with young and adult women in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. The guiding principle then and now is that young women are the experts on issues impacting their lives and they should be involved in running and directing the programs that serve them.

H.O.M.E.Y.—Homies
Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth
1337 Mission St, 2nd Floor
San Francisco, CA 94103
Ph: 415-861-1600 / Fax: 415-861-3791
The mission of HOMFY is to transform the lives of [at-risk] youth and grassroots community members to inspire them to not only choose a path of education, self-sufficiency and non-violence, but to also strive towards stability in their physical, mental and emotional health in the Mission District of San Francisco.

Youth Justice Coalition
1137 E. Redondo Blvd.
Los Angeles, Ca. 90302
Ph: 323 235-4243
http://youth4justice.org/
Youth Justice Coalition is a youth-led movement challenging race, gender, and class inequality in the Los Angeles County juvenile injustice system. Youth utilize direct action organizing, advocacy, political education and activist arts to demand and create change.

Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)
FFLIC New Orleans Office
1600 Orelta C. Haley Blvd.
New Orleans, LA 70113
Ph: (504) 522-5437 / Fax: (504) 522-5430
FFLIC is a statewide membership-based organization that fights for a better life for all of Louisiana’s youth, especially those involved in or targeted by the juvenile justice system. Based on principles of racial justice, human rights, and full participation, FFLIC uses education, community building, and leadership development advocacy in a fight for justice for youth. FFLIC has successfully campaigned for changes in youth incarceration policy.

LEGAL RESOURCES

National Center for Youth Law
405 14th Street, 15th Floor
Oakland, CA 94612
Ph(510) 835-8098 / Fax: (510) 835-8099
email: info@youthlaw.org/
website: http://www.youthlaw.org/

National Center for Juvenile Justice
3700 South Water St., Suite 200
Pittsburgh, PA
Ph: (412) 227-6950 / Fax: 412-227-6955tree
email: ncjj@ncjj.org

Human Rights Watch
Los Angeles Office:
11500 W. Olympic Blvd., Suite 441
Los Angeles, CA 90064 USA
Ph: (310) 477-5540 / Fax: (310)477-4622
E-mail: hrwlasb@hrw.org
San Francisco Office:
100 Bush Street, Suite 1812
San Francisco, CA 94104 USA
Ph: (415) 362-3250 / Fax: (415) 362-3255
E-mail: hrwsf@hrw.org

Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project/
Transgender in Prison Committee
1095 Market St. Suite 308
San Francisco, CA 94103
Ph: (415) 252-1444  www.tgijp.org
Send legal mail to the above address, c/o Dani Williams, Attorney at Law

Sylvia Rivera Law Project
322 8th Avenue, 3rd Floor
New York, NY 10001
www.srlp.org
Youth organizing resources (cont.)

Transgender Law Center
870 Market Street, Room 823
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 865-0176
www.transgenderlawcenter.org

Lambda Legal Defense
3325 Wilshire Blvd, Ste. 1300
Los Angeles, CA 90010-1729
(213) 382-7600
www.lambdalegal.org

ACLU of Northern California
Attn: A. Cleghorn or T. Lange
39 Drumm Street
San Francisco, CA 94111
(415) 621-2493
www.aclunc.org

**HEALTH RESOURCES**

Youthline
1-877-YOUTHLINE (1-877-968-8454)

National hotline answered by youth offering crisis counseling, information and referrals.

**National Suicide Prevention Hotline**
1 (800) 784-2433
24 hours a day / 7 days a week
1 (415) 781-0500 International
www.sfsuicide.org

**Al-Anon (Alateen for Younger Members)**
A twelve-step program for friends and families of people with alcohol addiction
1 (888) 425-2666
Monday - Friday 8 AM - 6 PM

Nar-Anon (for those affected by someone else’s addiction)
22527 Crenshaw Blvd. #200B
Torrence, Ca. 90505
1-800-477-6291

**National Domestic Violence Hotline**
1 (800) 799-7233
1 (800) 787-3224 TTY

**National Gay & Lesbian Youth Hotline**
1 (800) 347-8336
Hours: Monday through Friday
6:30 PM - 9:00 PM
Saturday: 12:00 Noon - 5:00 PM (Pacific Time)

**PEPline**
1(888) HIV-4911
Post-Exposure Prevention (PEP)
A 28-day cycle of drug treatment believed to be 80% effective in preventing an HIV negative person from becoming positive after exposure to HIV.

From The Beat Within Newsletter. The Beat Within’s mission is to provide incarcerated youth with consistent opportunity to share their ideas and life experiences through self-expression. To receive The Beat Within write:
275 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 (415) 503-4170

California Coalition for Women Prisoners
in vocational electronics. I have a plethora of self-help certificates.

I believe that perhaps my story can inspire the society to reconsider being so harsh on juvenile crime. Children who commit crimes, regardless of the crime itself, are exactly that—children!

When I was 16 I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. My boyfriend was in a gang, and he robbed and killed someone. I was tried as an adult and convicted of first degree murder and second degree robbery. I ended up with a life without parole sentence.

I never expected that my boyfriend and I would both be convicted for being the trigger person. How can two people be found guilty for the same action?

I have been in prison for 13 years and it doesn’t get any easier. I took my G.E.D. and am looking into correspondence college courses so I can take psychology.

When we are young we think we know it all but once the streets get a hold of you your life is over. Either you die or your entire life goes into a prison system that only corrupts us more. The system doesn’t help us, it only shows more ugliness. Being in prison is not the way to go. Please help us.

I was arrested at the age of 17 and charged as an adult. I am incarcerated for a crime I did not commit. I was convicted of first degree murder because of a past association with a guy I once dated who was a gang member and was murdered.

They say I retaliated on the gang and murdered my ex-boyfriend. But on the day he was killed I was in school. My teacher proved that by presenting a daily check sheet, a head count sheet, stating that I was there every hour of the day. This teacher also told them what type of student I was.

Two months later, when I was arrested, I was told that I had a co-defendant, a girl from my ex-boyfriend’s gang. I was attacked and threatened by this girl. She was trying to make me say I committed this crime so she could go free. I could not believe it, but she was found not guilty and did walk free.

The jurors later said that they got us confused and they thought that my co-defendant was the one who was in school on that particular day. But there was nothing we could do by then.

Being sentenced to 60 years to life has changed my life forever. In most cases jurors just go home to their families and they don’t realize someone’s life is on the line. So here I am at CCWF seeking help from you. Thank you.

I am currently serving a life sentence for a crime committed when I was 15-years-old. I was charged as an adult. While it’s true that children commit serious crimes, a child is still just a child. Juveniles are not adults.

All people can be rehabilitated through conscientious, serious programs. Juveniles are not fully developed. Our cases cry out for rehabilitation rather than punishment for the rest of our lives. Juveniles can be irrational as they are going through adolescence. Our immaturity tends to make us act emotionally and not think through all actions to the result.

We need to reclaim our lives. We can serve as examples for other adolescents of the power of redemption and reclamation. Please consider lending your support.

I’ve been locked up since the age of 16. I’m serving two 25 to life sentences, for the charges of carjacking, kidnapping, robbery, pandering and rape.

Everyone makes mistakes. But I did not do all that they are saying I did. I’m willing to be honest about what I did but I don’t want to give up on my life.

I have had a very hard life. I’ve been on my own since the age of 12. Could you please help me overturn this case or lead me to someone who could? I want my voice to be heard! I want to be free. I don’t want to die here in prison.

At the age of 16, I participated in a robbery that resulted in the death of a fellow high school student. I take full responsibility for the other student’s death and the pain and suffering it has caused her family and our community. I accept that I earned myself both punishment and rehabilitation. This horrific event happened in large part due to my own immaturity, drug abuse, and utter lack of
Speaking For Ourselves
Lifers Sentenced As Juveniles

ability to make effective decisions.

The State of California looked not upon my youth, my potential for learning, maturing, making amends, growth, or change. Instead, only my crimes were seen and used as the sole reasons to give up on me. When I was sentenced to a Life term in prison, the State effectively decided I was “unfixable”—at age 16—and not worthy of a second chance. To sentence a teen-ager to Life told me my life was not worth salvaging.

Now, after nearly 20 years, the Board Prison Terms effectively says the same. The crime is all that matters. Your mistakes are never let go. You will never serve enough time.

I was arrested when I was 16, tried as an adult, convicted on one count of first-degree murder, and sentenced to 26 to life. The murder victim was the father of my child.

I was not the shooter and I did not see the shooting. I had no prior criminal record or behavior. I was smart and just responsible enough. I cared for my one-year-old child well, but I was emotionally immature and damaged.

I regret the murder intensely, and will continue suffering the guilt and shame I feel. There is no way I will ever again be involved in victimizing another person.

My crime was committed when I was very much a child and did not possess the discernment or rationality of an adult. Even a year later, I thought, “What the hell was I thinking? Why did I do this and that; how could this have happened?” And today I don’t even recognize the 16 year-old I was, or relate to her thought processes. As an adult, who does?! But I’m paying for her mistake with my life.

How can judges/society deem a child permanently dangerous, un-rehabilitative, lacking potential and the ability to change (which is exactly what humans do as they mature)? And when we prove all these wrong, we’re caught in the indeterminate sentence web of no-parole practices.

Thank you for any fight you take on and the voice you give us.

At the age of 17 I was involved in a crime and tried as an adult for murder and attempted murder. I was convicted and received a life sentence.

I sit in prison with a life term for being the driver in a drive-by shooting masterminded by my co-defendant. My co-defendant happened to be my abusive boyfriend at the time. I’ve never pretended to be innocent of wrongdoing, however I don’t feel I should spend the rest of my natural life behind bars. Prior to this crime I’d had no negative contact with law enforcement.

I would appreciate any assistance you can offer me in hopes of regaining my freedom. Thank you in advance for your time and effort.

I have been incarcerated since the age of 16 for a crime that I did not do. The DNA did not match me yet I was convicted on circumstantial evidence.

I feel like my life was taken away from me at such a young age. There are times where I think I can’t get through one more day here. But then I think of my family, organizations that may help me, and the hope and faith that is instilled in me, because as long as there’s life, there’s hope.
The Fire Inside

No Quiero Morir en Prision!

Me arrestaron cuando tenia 17 anos y me dieron cargos de adulto. Me encarcelaron por un crimen que no cometi. Me pusieron la conviccion de 1 grado de matanza solo porque tuve una asociacion con un novio que fue parte de una pandilla y le mataron. Pero el dia que le mataron yo estaba en la escuela. Mi maestro tenia una prueva de contar las personas en el cuarto y que estaba en la clase cada hora al dia y tambien les dijo que tipo de estudiante soy. Cuando me arrestaron, 2 meses pasardon y me cargaron como adulto y me dijeron que tenia un co-defendant, una muchacha de la pandilla de mi novio, y ella me atacoy me amenazaro. Ella me empujo decir que cometi esa crimen para que ella puede ser libre pero porque no lo hice, ella manda amenazas a mi abogado.

Estaba encarcelada desde cuando tenia 16 anos. Tengo un sentence de 2 a 25 anos por robar un carro, un secuestro, pandering y violacion.

Cado uno se equivoca. Pero no hice todas las cosas que estan diciendo que hice. Puedo ser honesta y quiero que escuchen mi voz en este caso! No quiero sentir que mi vida no vale la pena.

Tenia una vida bastante dificil y estaba cuidando a mi misma desde que tenia 12 anos. Quiero estar libre. No quiero morir aqui en prision.

Tenia 16 anos cuando me arrestaron y tengo 25 a vida por un crimen que no cometi. Fue presente [cuando paso el crimen], y hoy la sociedad dice que si es presente es culpable. En una manera, es verdad. Pero a decir eso a un persona que tiene 16 anos que no esta pensando claro en la situacion que ocuuyo el crimen. Y diles que su vida pasara atras de las barras y que nunca tendra la oportunidad de vivir libre otra vez. Soy yo. Que tipo de humanidad es? No es justicia.

Espero que tendra un futuro mayor y quiero que alguien escucha a los jovenes. Si nos arrancarnos, arrancan nuestra futura y el suyo.

Free Alex Sanchez!

Alex Sanchez, founder and executive director of Homies Unidos, was arrested on June 24 on federal racketeering charges as part of a wider indictment against members of the MS-13 street gang. Sanchez, alleged of involvement in a 2006 conspiracy to murder a Mara Salvatrucha member in El Salvador, had once been involved in gang activities in his youth, but the 37 year old Salvadoran native left the life more than ten years ago to form the community-based Homies Unidos, whose mission is “end violence and promote peace in our communities through gang intervention.”

Homies Unidos released this statement: “The Homies Unidos Board stands united in full support, behind our executive director, Alex Sanchez and his family. For the past 11 years, Alex has been committed to helping bring about change in his community. He is an exemplary leader, respected colleague and dedicated husband and father. Just as we are confident in Alex’s innocence, we are confident that Los Angeles and the nation will remember that an indictment is an allegation only.”

Alex was denied bail on June 30, despite strong community support, including hundreds of support letters submitted to the court and demonstrations at the courthouse the day of his bail hearing demanding his release. For more information about support for Alex, visit www.WeAreAlex.org.

For more information about Homies Unidos:
1625 W Olympic Blvd # 706
Los Angeles, CA 90015-3811

Taken from: “Why Was Alex Sanchez Arrested?”, published June 26, 2009. Uprisingradio.org
Take Me As I Am

by Sable

take me as I am.
the arch of my back as I stand upright.
the boldness in my face
the smooth touch of every curve
take me as I am.
with every imperfection to my acknowledgment & even those I can’t admit take me as I am.

embrace my individuality, my wisdom, my youth,
& divine spirituality

with every imperfection to my acknowledgment & even those I can’t admit take me as I am.

take me as I am.
no need to curve my tongue, I make my mistakes…
for I am still young

only my god is the judge of me for I am what I set myself to be take me as I am.

watch how i grow,
the things I accept, the things I know…
I am only one person…true to myself
never the need to hide for I am what I am, and who I am is me…
ever duplicated; one of a kind as you can surely see take me as I am.

What Happened?

by Hakim

The bus was late and a I had no clue so was my fate
I still had time to smoke some weed to start off my day
All the sudden cops all over the place like somebody called ‘um
Though I had dreams and aspirations Allah chose to stall’um
Before I knew it I was beaten and confused
I chose my “homeboy” to confide to ‘bout my blues
We went to Sacramento to start a life anew
In a months’ time you’ll never believe the things I got into
The thing that strikes me the most which I’ll never forget Is when a man nearly lost his life – this I truly regret
My hands were covered with blood and what was I to do
I prayed to Jesus cause at the time he was the only God I knew
To my surprise there was a greater God whom I didn’t know
He saw the hurt, wrath, and silence which I couldn’t show
My prayer answered, but there was still something very wrong
Every night I dreamed of my death and blackened songs
Three years later I found imprisoned
I was told I’d get out in eight years but fate didn’t listen
Another life lost, my grandma, how come I didn’t see it
May she rest in peace, but it should have been me to go, I mean it
So the question of, “what did I do wrong?” kills my Mom inside
Cause it was me not her an Allah know that I’ll never know why I chose to take my anger out on someone else
And now I’ve hit the corner and I’ve ran into myself
Though I had dreams and aspirations Allah chose to stall’um
All the sudden cops all over the place like somebody called ‘um.
Surviving the System
By Suzy Mellen

When the judge sentenced me, I thought he said “25-to-Life.” After a few months of being in prison, one of my roommates read my face sheet. She said to me, “Mellen, you were sentenced to LIFE WITHOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF PAROLE.” I said, “What does that mean?” She explained to me that I would never go home. That I would die in prison. I was in a state of shock then, just as I was throughout my trial. I could have become bitter, paralyzed, and powerless to the point of being crippled because of the shock of getting convicted of a horrible crime with which I had no connection. The suffering and pain attacked me emotionally. How could this have happened to me? I was desperate for an answer … that is when God became so real to me. When I was stripped from my life, my family and my home and left with NOTHING, I realized that God was all I needed. It’s been one long journey and a very painful one. The tendency is to want to give up … especially when your thoughts are, “I can’t do it anymore!”

That’s when I started learning about myself. My spirit within gave me strength, and yes, even JOY to keep going. Something inside moved me. I became motivated to turn everything negative into something positive and powerful. Prison wanted to break me. That is when I embraced the life system that tried to destroy me. I made my “life sentence” my friend, as opposed to my enemy.

In my wildest dreams, I could never imagine God would use me in such a way. I might be in prison, but prison is NOT in me! We only have one journey in this life, so I want to make it count and make a difference to help others that are facing life sentences!

Written for my lifer’s group!

For more information, check out: http://home.earthlink.net/~wronglyconvicted/index.html

Still Breathing
By Terah Lawyer, SAGE

The California Prison System never ceases to amaze me in the amount of disappointments that I have witnessed thus far. I’ve been incarcerated since I was 18 years of age and due to my lack of cooperation with officials, I’m serving 16 years to Life. I’ve never been married, have no children, never voted, barely traveled, hardly lived a life. I made small mistakes that had catastrophic results and I made wrong decisions that resulted in life-altering consequences.

Yet, I am blessed with the gift of still breathing. However, in this prison environment, my entire being is in a state of starvation—lacking the essential elements that crosses over a teenage girl into her womanhood. Today at 25 years of age, I’m hungry—craving the proper nourishments emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually.

I’m a full-time college student, a vocation graduate, a member of the youth ministry, and I’ve taken every single self-help class the prison has offered, yet I’m still longing, searching, and wishing for something more. Although I’ve learned from my past mistakes, the prison system does not provide an opportunity for young Lifers to redeem themselves or make amends to those we may have harmed directly or indirectly.

In turn, it seems as though we are fighting to save our own lives or prove to the system that we are merely “worthy” of living, although the system believes we are already dead.

Even though I’m still breathing, the system secretly wishes for me to take my last breath. For many young Lifers maturing, growing, and living in this prison environment with a culture designed to destroy, hope is scarce. How can the will to live thrive in a hope-deprived atmosphere such as prison?
**Precious Releases...**

**Myrtle Green**, the 77-year-old woman on the cover of Legal Services for Prisoners’ “Dignity Campaign” pamphlet, was released after 21 years of incarceration. The Board of Parole Hearings finally upheld her 2005 parole grant after reviewing it in May. CCWP was glad to have visited with Myrtle at CIW over the past couple of years. Myrtle’s daughter, Louise (Lulu) Williams, who has been central to the fight for her mother’s freedom said on hearing about the Board’s decision: “To the family members, never give up! Always stay connected to your incarcerated family member; they DO need your support... To those many people who helped me almost day-to-day make my mom’s release possible, Thank You! You will always have my utmost respect and gratitude…” Sincerely, Louise (Lulu) Williams, Jackson MS.

**Minda Wilcox** was released after serving nearly 22 years of a 15-to-life sentence. The Board found Minda suitable for parole for the fifth time and on May 1st the Governor decided to uphold the Board’s decision.

**Connie Keel** was released Wednesday, April 1st, after serving nearly 30 years at the California Institution for Women on a 25-to-life sentence for a murder her abusive husband committed.

**Freddie Sue Aguirre** was finally released after her 10th parole suitability hearing.

In addition to these wonderful releases, the Board recently found about ten other women we know of suitable for release. This unusually large number of suitability findings is most welcome especially in light of the negative impact that Proposition 9 will have on the prospects for freedom for life-term prisoners. Although we are not sure what this means for the future, these suitability findings are an affirmation of the long-term, hard work that many organizations have been doing to support parole for Lifers and we hope for more releases in the months to come!

**Pending...**

**Debbie Peagler** was found suitable for parole on July 10th, but she is not out yet. The Parole Board’s Decision Review Committee has to affirm Debbie’s finding of suitability. They have up to 120 days to review the finding. After that, her finding goes to Governor Schwarzenegger who has 30 days to confirm or deny her release.

Debbie is a survivor of domestic violence who has been in prison since 1983. Her supporters are pushing the Decision Review Committee to expedite review of Debbie’s case as she may not have 120 days to live, due to her diagnosis of stage IV lung cancer. They ask that people call the Decision Review Committee at (916) 445-1539 and urge them to release Debbie immediately.

WE INVITE READERS TO SEND US INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR OWN RELEASE DATES OR DENIALS!

**Victory in SF8 Case but more work still to be done**

On Monday, July 6 all charges of murder and conspiracy against four members of the SF8–Ray Boudreaux, Richard Brown, Hank Jones, and Harold Taylor–were dropped due to insufficient evidence. Charges against a fifth defendant, Richard O’Neal, had already been dropped last year. In a tactical legal decision, two other defendants in the case–Herman Bell and Jalil Muntaqim, who have been political prisoners for decades based on convictions in another case, agreed to plead to greatly reduced charges and both received sentences of probation for these charges. They will be returning to New York state where they will continue their fight for parole. The last defendant, Francisco Torres, maintains his innocence and has a court appearance on August 10th.

This is a very significant political victory, demonstrating the strength of the movement that has been built to support the 8 and exposing the total weakness of the Government’s case. This 38 year old case was brought against these 8 Black elder community activists in 2007 based on torture-coerced confessions and funded by Homeland Security money.

For more info and to support the SF8, write Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, PO Box 90221, Pasadena, CA 91109 or email freethesf8@riseup.net.
In 2007 a Maryland prisoner was admitted to a hospital emergency room presenting in severe physical and mental distress. It was soon determined that his condition was not caused by any infectious disease nor was he experiencing a serious allergic reaction of some kind, but that he was actually suffering from acute alcohol poisoning!

Since then, prison officials and medical staff all over the country have been on the alert trying to address the increasing incidents of alcohol poisoning due to ingestion of alcohol-based sanitizers. Prisoners self-medicating in order to become numb to the extreme circumstances they face is not a new concept, but are there any real health risks associated with this practice? Consider the following:

A 90 proof bottle of Congac contains 45 percent ethyl alcohol (Ethanol). Among other effects, we know that alcohol depresses the nerves within the central nervous system (CNS) that control involuntary actions such as breathing and the gag reflex (which prevents choking). A fatal dose of alcohol will eventually stop these functions. Ethanol is a central nervous system depressant and has significant psychoactive effects in sub-lethal doses. Death from ethyl alcohol consumption is possible when blood alcohol level reaches 0.4%. A blood level of 0.5% or more is commonly fatal.

Hand sanitizers like Purell and Germ-X, which are 62-95% percent ethyl-alcohol, are far more potent than popular conventional drinks such as beer (5%), wine (10%) or hard liquor (40%). A single lethal dose of Ethanol for a human adult equals about 8 ounces or more. Ethanol is also used as biofuel, an alternative to gasoline. (It is afterall, combustible!)

So, ingesting a potent dose of ethanol can definitely cause serious damage to one’s health.

Even after a person stops drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body. It is dangerous to assume a person will be fine by just sleeping it off.

**Critical Signs for Alcohol Poisoning** include mental confusion, stupor, vomiting, slow breathing (fewer than eight breaths per minute); irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths); hypothermia (low body temperature), hypoglycemia (bluish skin color and paleness), seizures caused by low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) and finally, coma. Untreated severe dehydration from vomiting can eventually cause permanent brain damage, or death.

So what? Well, one thing is for sure – doin’ time is HARD! There are not many non-drug alternatives for people suffering from anxiety or depression, and certainly if we all had our ‘druthers’ most of us would ‘druther’ put something wholesome and healing into our bodies.

If you or a friend find yourself constantly seeking relief from the madness by ingesting substances which are NOT meant for human consumption, perhaps you should do some self reflection and/or talk to someone about alternatives to substance abuse. Make no mistake, this is substance abuse, and the outcome never works out in your favor. So what ARE safe (and legal) alternatives to this practice? Drop me a line, let me know what you think……

And remember; it’s always better to be safe, not sorry…

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**Youth Justice Coalition – F.R.E.E. L.A. High School**

YJC started FREE LA High School in 2007 to support young people to earn their high school diploma while transforming their communities, LA and the nation. F.R.E.E. LA (Fight the Revolution to Educate and Empower LA) High School is one of LA’s few community alternatives to detention and incarceration for young people. The goals are to integrate young people with system experience back into education; strengthen basic literacy and numeracy skills; build life and survival skills; and build bridges between the street and higher education and career. The school relies on building youth, parent and community power to break our communities’ reliance on underground economies, heal from violence and restore justice to our own and others’ lives. Students learn conflict resolution, community organizing, leadership, media and public policy development through classroom and hands-on experiential learning. The purpose is not just to build students but to build a movement inside lock-ups, within the corridors of government and in the streets.
In New Orleans, the State has created a new kind of independent school system made up of public charter schools. Let me tell you what this charter school experiment means for poor African-American children in New Orleans: more of the same. Middle class & wealthy families have more choices of (publicly funded) schools with green grass, advanced classes, specialized training, and physical and mental health providers. Poor families who cannot meet or don’t know about the entrance requirements are relegated once again to the least resourced, least caring classrooms.

FFLIC’s New Orleans organizer Ashana Bigard remarks, “what you see now is an extreme separation between the charter schools and how they treat kids and how the regular public schools are. For example, at Carver (a non-charter school), kids line up every day outside wearing orange uniforms that look exactly like prison outfits and file in through metal detectors, being patted down by one, sometimes two and three security guards at a time. But at Lusher (a publicly funded charter school), children never have to walk through metal detectors or worry about being harassed by security guards; instead, they start the day lounging on benches on beautifully manicured lawns, no doubt thinking about their school work or after school activities.”

FFLIC defines the school to prison pipeline as the systematic and institutional approach to depriving poor people of color (mostly African American in the South) a right to an equitable and quality education; the deliberate approach to using poor people of color to fill the Prison Industrial Complex; and the continued intentional efforts to make poor people of color feel inferior to what is deemed the superior race; and this is done by pushing kids out of school through unjust suspensions and expulsions, high-stakes testing, lack of educational resources on a consistent basis, denial of special education services, lowered expectations, zero-tolerance, and mentally preparing kids for prison by creating prison-like environments in the schools with the overuse of police and security guards policing students.

FFLIC New Orleans has been working to dismantle the school to prison pipeline and has had a good number of victories! Staff and leaders have advocated with more than 75 parents in the greater New Orleans area regarding school discipline issues, formed three community task forces […] and trained over 300 individuals including school security guards, teachers, parents, and school administrators in New Orleans and across the country on the school-to-prison pipeline and how to dismantle it.

The fight for justice, equity, and quality remains. There is still so much to do! FFLIC believes that it’s critical that we being to reexamine how we value poor black children living in impoverished communities. We must go one step further and fight one day longer to ensure that our children live in a society where they feel safe, valued, and loved.

(Reprinted from FFLIC newsletter, “Experimenting on our Children: How the School to Prison Pipeline Works in the ‘New’ New Orleans Education System”)
Come work with us!
California Coalition for Women Prisoners volunteer nights are on the 4th Wednesday of every month at 6pm
1540 Market St., rm 490, San Francisco
Write to us or call us (415) 255-7036 x4
www.womenprisoners.org
fax: (415) 552-3150
email: info@womenprisoners.org

CCWP Mission: CCWP is a grassroots social justice organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people, and communities of color by the prison industrial complex (PIC). We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families, and communities most impacted in building this movement.

Yes, I want to subscribe to The Fire Inside!

- Enclosed is $25 for a subscription. This supports prisoner subscriptions. The newsletter is free for all people in prisons, jails, and detention centers.
- I would like to be contacted about getting involved

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