

# STATEVILLE SPEAKS

VOICES FROM THE INSIDE • SUMMER 2019

## MY STORY OF WRONGFUL IMPRISONMENT

By Kilroy Watkins

I was a street kid. Not necessarily a boy scout; lone who got into trouble here and there but was impacted by a drug-infected and violence-infected community. I witnessed a lot of death early in my life as a result of gang violence and police violence. There was no counseling for us.

My introduction to the criminal justice system came in 1992 at the hands of rogue Chicago cops. I was 21 years old and accused of a crime I did not commit. I was taken into a small room by several police detectives, who choked me repeatedly until I signed documents that the State's Attorney drew up. These documents said that I murdered someone, which I did not. The police also forced a 15-year old girl to sign a statement saying that she saw me and another man murder someone. She later told the judge during my trial that she only signed the document because she wanted to go home, but the court dismissed her testimony and claimed the statement that she signed – a statement she did not write herself – was fact. As a result, I was incarcerated from 1993 until early 2019. I spent 25 years trying to exonerate myself.

I wasn't easily deterred, because during my extensive stay at Pontiac Correctional Center, I invested a great deal of time into education. There were numerous jobs in prison. I worked in the laundry room for \$20 a month, and later as a janitor, which also paid \$20 a month. The prison's law library paid \$40 a month at the time if you were a law clerk, but I'd need a paralegal degree to do that. Even to work in the law library as a janitor or as a librarian, I needed a high school diploma or G.E.D.

I took on that challenge. I dropped out of school around 8th grade, and my reading scores were not very good. While in prison, I enrolled in school, first in something called A.B.E. – Adult Basic Education – to boost my scores to get me into the G.E.D. program.

I was able to do this despite lockdowns at Pontiac that would last 30 or 60 days, where no one could leave their cell – not even to go to



*Kilroy Watkins at a police brutality protest in 2019.*

class. I asked the teacher for some books that I could use during lockdown. The teacher gave me workbooks that used to belong to inmates who started school but couldn't finish; either

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**“I wasn't easily deterred, because I invested a great deal of time into education.”**

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because they got in trouble for fighting, died in prison, or were transferred. He'd give me five or 10 workbooks at a time. During lockdown, he'd come to my cell with a big bag of books and would hand them to me through the bars. I'd hand him the completed workbooks,

through the bars, so he could grade them. We started a system, an education behind the bars system, because I couldn't attend the classroom.

From the time I got to prison in 1993 until 1995, I got my A.B.E., my G.E.D. and then a paralegal degree from MacMurray College, which offered classes at Pontiac. This enabled me to work as in the prison's law library as a law clerk – or “jailhouse lawyer” as they sometimes call us – and help individuals pursue their appeals or assist in their grievance processes; such as for the denial of access to health care, or denial of access to the courts to pursue their legal claims.

I also continued my own education,

**SEE WATKINS, PAGE 8**

*Hope...Redemption...Change*

# LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

By Dawn Larsen

There has been some movement on several of the bills that are currently before the Illinois congress, as well as an update on a long running class action lawsuit.

HB2045 was introduced by Rep. Carol Ammons (103rd District) earlier this year and addresses the \$5.00 co-pay that Illinois prisoners currently must pay in order to be seen by a medical provider in IDOC. The purpose of the bill is to eliminate the co-pay, as it creates a hardship for many prisoners. HB5104 had previously been put forward to address eliminating the co-pay, but that bill died last November. This time around the bill passed both houses, was signed by the governor and became Public Act 101-0086 on July 19, 2019. It will go into effect January 1, 2020.

There is very positive news on the Lippert v. Baldwin class action lawsuit pertaining to medical and dental care in IDOC. An agreement was reached in federal district court on January 3, 2019 with IDOC. It includes appointing a monitor to oversee the changes that will be forthcoming, with the intention of ensuring IDOC residents get the medical care

that is constitutionally required. The monitor will work with IDOC's medical director to implement the new guidelines that have been agreed upon.

HB2541, the Re-Entering Citizens Civics Education Act was filed by Rep. Sonya Harper (6th District) in February of this year and "provides that the Department of Corrections and the Department of Juvenile Justice shall provide a nonpartisan peer-led civics program to teach civics to soon-to-be released citizens." The bill provides that those who are to be released within 12 months will be offered a program that will be led by "nonpartisan civic organizations" who "shall provide adequate training to peer educators on matters including voting rights, government institutions, current affairs and simulations of voter registration, election and democratic processes". This bill became Public Act 101-0441 on 8/21/19 and will become law on January 1, 2020.

The origins and status of HB2620 and SB2054, both pertaining to sentence credit, are described in the letter from Gregory Chambers on page 4.

HB0094, introduced by Rep. Justin Slaughter (27th District) pertains to sentence credit. "It provides that those serving a sentence for an offense committed prior to June 19, 1998, who have participated in certain programs while in IDOC, including substance abuse programs, educational programs, life skills courses, behavior modification programs and re-entry planning, prior to the effective date of the amendatory Act, will be eligible for sentence credit. An inmate must provide documentation that shows they participated for at least 45 days in any of these programs in order to receive 90 days sentence credit. For those not able to provide documentation, the sentence credit will be 45 days. It also provides those who obtain a bachelor's or master's degree while committed to the Department of Corrections, including while held in pre-trial detention will be awarded 180 days of sentence credit. HB0094 does not apply to those serving natural life, or those required to serve 100% of their sentence." This bill became Public Act 101-0040 and will become law on January 1, 2020. ■

## IN OUR NAME

By Richard Dyches

You want us to have self-worth...  
So you destroy our self-worth.  
You want us to be responsible...  
So you take away all responsibilities.  
You want us to be positive and constructive...  
So you degrade us and make us useless.  
You want us to be non-violent...  
So you put us where there is violence all around us.  
You want us to be kind and loving people...  
So you subject us to hatred and cruelty.  
You want us to quit being the tough guy...  
So you put all the losers under one roof.  
You want us to be part of our community...  
So you isolate us from our community.  
You want us to quit exploiting you...  
So you put us where we can exploit each other.  
You want us to take control of our lives,  
Own our own problems and stop being parasites...  
So you make us totally dependent on you! ■

## PAIN

By Eric Robles

The pain in my head, the pain in my heart.  
The pain you cannot see, it is real.  
I will not allow this pain to reign over me.  
I will not allow it to consume me.  
Rather I will conquer it in every way,  
And make it my power to get through  
every day. ■

## TIME

By Eric Robles

Time, we think it's on our side  
We think we own it.  
We think it lasts forever.  
In reality time is blind.  
Time knows no bounds.  
Time is malign.  
But wait, time, I'm out of time. ■

## THEN I CRY....

By Richard Dyches

freedom taken  
life forsaken  
steel bars  
painful scars  
mental strains  
waist chains  
concrete walls  
collect calls  
nothing's fair  
hard to bear  
mind games  
nick names  
count bells  
stair wells  
masked strangers  
constant dangers  
jingling keys  
trembling knees  
lonely hours  
faith sours  
years wasted  
hope tasted  
questions why  
then I cry.... ■

To subscribe to Stateville Speaks, or to make a donation or sponsor an issue, see page 11 for details.

# FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to another edition of Northeastern Illinois University's Stateville Speaks. The first thing you may notice is it comes with some color. No, we did not get a windfall (not yet, anyways), nor did we colorfully spend funds that are so generously donated to the newsletter, we simply found a new printing service. While our old one served us well, we are excited that our new one affords us shiny paper and color, all for less. Thank you Lincoln Square Printing for sharpening your pencil to make this happen.

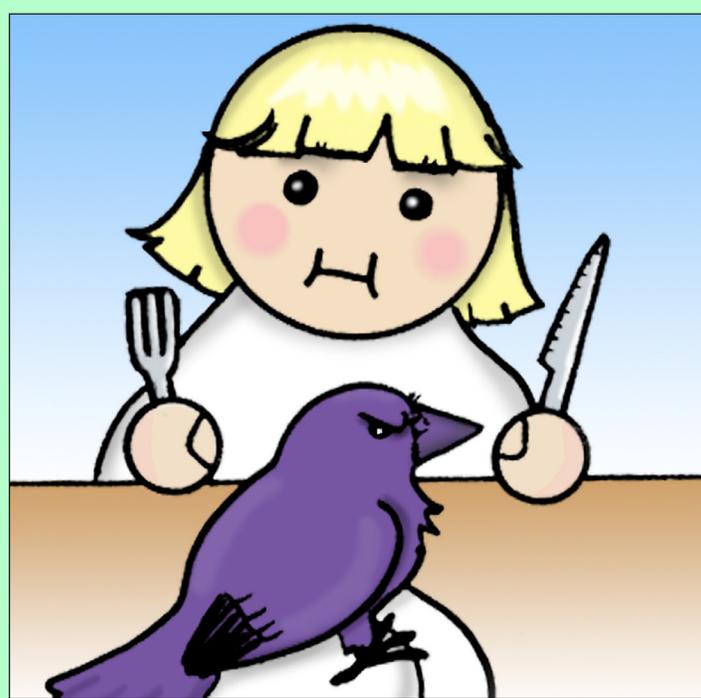
And what better to "bring to life" than the edition that tells the bitter-sweet last 25 years in the life of Kilroy Watkins? Plucked from the streets, repeatedly choked into falsely confessing to a murder, facing some of the shadiest, most powerful and connected charlatans he will meet in his life, yet still having the gumption to never give up on himself.

Cruel, callous, hypocritical and seeming implausible, the sad truth is that Kilroy's false conviction and imprisonment is not an anomaly, but more common than any of us really want to believe.

So we thank him for sharing and we hope this helps to continue the dialogue and subsequent action in not only getting those still wrongfully imprisoned out, but in allowing many like Kilroy to get out of post-conviction purgatory and fully join society.

Which leads me to ask, does the State ever apologize for their wrongful, often knowing-wrongful actions? Also, whether guilty or innocent, will we, as a society ever allow for redemption, second chances and true restitution? We sure hope so and going forward, we hope nothing but the best for Mr. Watkins.

Fortunately, there are some good changes taking place such as the potentially life-saving rolling back of the medical co-pay. This will allow for medical treatment and medications regardless of



## CORRECTIONS

**Fall/Winter 2018:** Please note on page 2, Team Freedom, discretionary parole was referenced to have been abolished in 1977, when, in fact, it occurred in 1978. Additionally, Truth in Sentencing laws (TIS) changed in 1998, not 1999. We apologize for not correcting this at time of print.

**Spring 2019:** Please note that on page 3, in the announcement of the essay contest, "parole" was misspelled as "prarole" We regret the error. ■

financial circumstances. This does not happen by itself; kudos to the John Howard Association and Restore Justice for their hard work and to Rep. Carol Ammons (103rd District) for the courage to follow through.

Ground was broken on the mental health facility on the former site of Illinois Youth Center-Joliet. This was a direct result and part of the settlement of the longstanding and hard-fought lawsuit *Rasho v Balwin*, brought by the law firms of Dentons, Equip and Equity, Mayor Brown and Uptown People's Law Center. (See Stateville Speaks, Summer 2016 issue). It is scheduled for completion by mid-to-late 2021.

The good news for parole is that the discussion is here and not going away. Organizations such as Illinois Prison Project, Parole

Illinois and many others are working very hard to make this happen. This campaign will no doubt take time, come incrementally, and will need very strong support from families, friends of those concerned about second chances, or

in some cases a real first chance at being a part of society.

I am also convinced that The Pathway to Community (HB2400), or the likes of, will need to pass first in order for parole to really become an acceptable norm in Illinois. If we cannot have compassion and allow for release of terminally ill, elderly and the few handpicked, vetted, "model prisoners" such as what is called for in HB 2400, than why would we expect sweeping change? HB2400 will be back in early 2020, and while painfully limited (my words), it can and should be an excellent and successful trial of how parole could happen.

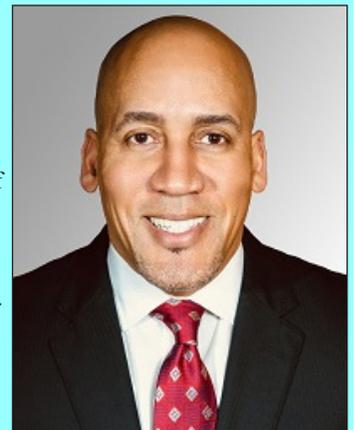
While getting out is the goal, getting out with a plan should be the standard. Please use your time as effectively as possible. Many of you will be getting out, plan that exit. Please find some resources, as it will also be our mission to find and disseminate information on any and all resources. We know there are a lot of effective programs and we welcome you to let us know who you are and what you do.

In the meantime, thank you for reading, and thank you for overlooking my transgressions in editing. I know you all see it, I cringe, you forgive, we try harder and we move-on to another edition of Stateville Speaks. ■

## PRITZKER NAMES NEW IDOC DIRECTOR

This past spring, Governor Pritzker announced his appointment of Rob Jeffreys as his new director of Illinois Department of Corrections. He has spent over two decades of his twenty-four years of corrections experience in the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.

Jeffreys earned both his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Science in Criminal Justice from Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. ■



# LETTER TO STATEVILLE SPEAKS

Dear Ms. Gayle Tulipano, Editor:

In the fall/winter 2018 edition of Stateville Speaks, I had the occasion to read an article entitled “#Team Freedom Proposal Introduction” written by Elbonie Burnside of the Logan Correctional Center. In the article, Ms. Burnside offered three ways she thought would have the greatest impact on the state’s problem of prison overcrowding: 1) Parole Board, 2) Truth-in-Sentencing and 3) Program Sentence Credit.

Relative to the issues of the Truth-in-Sentencing Act (TSA) and Earned Program Sentence Credit (EPSC), during the month of November 2018, a group of offenders at the Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center assembled to address those issues. The group united in a campaign to enact my proposed Restorative Sentencing Act that would effectively render all offenders sentenced pursuant to TSA laws eligible to receive EPSC.

On the 27th day of November 2018, I forwarded the proposal to a friend and longtime associate Yaacov Delaney, Organizer for Restoring Rights and Justice Reform, at the Community Renewal Society in Chicago, seeking an advocate to pursue the endeavor. Mr. Delaney pitched the proposal to his supervisor who subsequently authorized pursuit of the measure.

A series of meetings were held with the policy director and staff at the organization and members of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in consideration of the proposal and for the purpose of editing and testing its legal viability.

Our campaign continued by writing letters seeking support and sponsorship to State Senator Kimberly A. Lightford, State Representatives Chris Welch, Arthur Turner and Lashawn Ford. We also sent a letter to the current Lieutenant Governor Julianna Stratton. The Community Renewal Society sought the support of State Representative Justin Slaughter. Representative Slaughter advised Mr. Delaney he would sponsor the bill in the House of Representatives while Senator Lightford informed him she would sponsor the bill in the Senate. On February 14, 2019, Rep. Slaughter filed

the bill with the clerk of the 101st General Assembly as HB2620 and on February 15, 2019, Sen. Lightford caused the bill to be filed with the secretary of the Senate as SB2054.

As previously discussed, offenders sentenced under TSA laws would be eligible to receive EPSC (730 ILCS 5/3-603(a)(4.7) within the following proposed limitations: “... shall not reduce the sentence of the prisoner to less than the following amounts 1) 75% of his or her sentence if the prisoner is required to serve 85% of his or her sentence... 2) 60% of his or her sentence if the prisoner is required to serve 75% of his or her sentence... 3) 90% of his or her sentence if the prisoner is required to serve 100% of his or her sentence.”

Additionally, a provision Delaney and I discussed but was not contained in the initial proposal was added to the filed version of the bill. That provision would amend 730 ILCS 5/3-6-3(a)(3) to make TSA offenders eligible to receive Earned Discretionary Sentence Credit (EDSC). This statutory provision would allow *offenders required to serve 100% of his or her sentence to earn not more than 3 days for each month of his or her sentence, a person required to serve 85% of his or her sentence to earn not more than 7.5 days for each month of his or her sentence, and offenders required to serve 75% of his or her sentence to earn not more than 12 days sentence credit for each month of his or her sentence* of imprisonment.

The battle has just begun and I encourage current offenders, ex-offenders, proponents of the sentencing reform laws, and advocates for programs designed to restore offenders to useful citizenship to join this campaign with the group of offenders at the Kewanee Life Skills Re-entry Center and the Community Renewal Society for the enactment of the Restorative Sentencing Act.

Respectfully,

Gregory L. Chambers

*Yaacov Delaney is a formally incarcerated, social advocate and an organizer for the Restoring Rights and Justice Reform Community Renewal Society.*

# I SEE DEAD PEOPLE

By Richard Dyches

I see dead people. Not in the context of their being inanimate or devoid of life, but rather what is intended by the term “Dead” – lacking any feeling or sensitivity.

I see dead people. In a place where every day is a virtual vision of Halloween in prison ... as almost everyone wears a mask. They trick individuals to believe they were “this” or “that” on the street, so they can con with no regard for consequence. “Treating” themselves to the property of others, tasting the sweetness of bitter fruit.

I see dead people. Black, white...red people, in the grips of racial pride, under the guise of being simply proud of ethnicity! Zombies, eyes wide open but vacant; where the walk to the mess hall is like being trapped in some weird documentary by Wes Craven! Graves in the form of bunk beds, where the mentally ill attempt to sleep away time, blind to reality day-by-day. Spiritual decay and distress eats at what’s left of frailty.

I see dead people. People haunted by their own mistakes! Followed by the demons of desire and lust, and no such thing as “trust” do they trust! The saying goes, “it’s just us”, plus who will awake the dead? Perhaps the boss, whose carried his own cross... buried alive inside, crucified to these walls.

I see dead people. Evil disguised as good... a matrix of darkness where the heartless roam freely. I wonder, will tougher laws and prime politicians resurrect the dead? Will programs and pseudo restorative justice programs resurrect the dead?

I “think” I am dead people. I now see myself in the mirror image of chains and pains... socially removed and almost dormant; like some disease, afraid to infect others with my B.P. (borderline pessimism). Awake me from my sleep. Convince me that I’ve dreamt it all! Tell me it was some kind of butterfly effect... and neglect really isn’t real. Release me from my grave (prison).

Already enough said. I will leave you now while I count myself among the dead!! ■

## SUBMISSIONS WANTED

Stateville Speaks wants to publish your article, essay, letter, poem or artwork in an upcoming issue. Please try to limit articles to around 500 words. Articles may be edited for length. Artwork will most likely be published in color. Due to the volume of submissions we receive, work will not be returned. If you have a topic you would like us to address in an upcoming edition, drop us a line and let us know. See page 11 for address.



# WHY ELDERLY PRISONERS SHOULD BE RELEASED

By Jennifer Soble and Bill Ryan

Illinois spends hundreds of millions of dollars every year locking up elderly people like Janet L. Jackson.

Although just 65 years old, Jackson's arthritis means that she often needs a wheelchair to get around the Logan Correctional Center, Illinois' only women's prison. But her mind is sharp. A voracious prisoners' rights advocate, she fought to make Logan ADA compliant for the many disabled inmates the state continues to incarcerate.

An ordained minister and certified paralegal, Jackson mentors younger women and helps others with their cases to prevent anyone else from dying in prison. In the 33 years she has been in Logan on a life sentence for aiding in the murder of her abusive husband, she has never once had an institutional infraction.

Sherman Morissette was sentenced to life without parole for robbing a cab driver at knifepoint, though no one was hurt and Morissette is a Vietnam veteran. Thirty-five years later, Morissette wakes up at 4 a.m. everyday inside the Stateville Correctional Center.

Morissette moves gingerly; he's waiting for a double hip replacement to treat the osteoarthritis that ended his 20-year career as a prison paralegal and limits his mobility. Before everyone else awakes, he has read, prayed and completed puzzles to keep his 69-year-old mind sharp.

Morissette will spend the rest of the day reading, helping others with their legal cases, and writing to his friends in the free world.

Nearly 20% of the inmates in the Illinois Department of Corrections are elderly. That figure that has more than doubled since 2010, and it will climb past 30% by 2030. Tough-on-crime legislation in the 1980s and '90s abolished parole in Illinois and made it nearly impossible for violent offenders to earn "good time" credit.

Extremely long sentences and the absence of parole means that more and more people will follow in Jackson and Morissette's shoes; they will remain in prison decades longer than necessary for them to rehabilitate themselves. Like Jackson and Morissette, one in seven will be sentenced to die in custody.

Their incarceration is multiplying our state's gargantuan debt. Illinois spent \$1.6 billion on corrections in 2018, more than the entire \$1.3 billion shortfall in the state's 2020 budget.

Because of their significant medical needs, elderly people in prison cost two to five times more to incarcerate than average. Rethinking the way, we incarcerate elderly people could help close the budget gap. Using a conservative incarceration estimate of \$70,000 a year per elderly person, releasing just the elderly people who have already served 20 years in prison would save Illinois \$200 million every year.

Despite the enormous cost, incarcerating people like Jackson and Morissette does not make us safe. Elderly people, especially those who have served significant prison sentences, almost never reoffend.

In 2012, the state of Maryland released nearly 200 elderly people who had been

convicted of murder and had served more than 20 years. Five years later, the group has a recidivism rate of 3%. Ten minutes with Jackson and Morissette helps explain why; in addition to being physically incapable of reoffending, many elderly inmates have spent decades on self-improvement, education and spiritual growth.

In fact, because elderly people are frequently victimized in prison, releasing elderly inmates should drive down crime statewide. Although they are remarkable people, Jackson and Morissette are in no way unique. Like thousands of people, they are trapped in a system that has made no space for redemption, personal growth, or changed circumstances. We have failed them, the thousands of others like them, and ourselves.

Our insistence on perpetual punishment disregards the strength of the human spirit, has sucked our resources dry, and has made us less safe. It is time for Illinois to do better, and to actively correct the harm that perpetual punishment has inflicted on us all.

*This letter was originally printed in the Chicago Sun-Times on August 12, 2019. Jennifer Soble is the executive director of the Illinois Prison Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing Illinois' prison population through direct representation.*

*Bill Ryan has been a prison reform activist since 1993 and led the movement to abolish the death penalty in Illinois and is the Founder and Consulting Editor of Stateville Speaks Newsletter. ■*

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## PAROLE: A SAFETY VALVE FOR THE PLETHORA OF WRONGFULLY CONVICTED

Dear Editor,

I am writing to you on behalf of ParoleIllinois.org and all of the innocent people currently in prison in Illinois. We are dedicated to establishing a responsible, comprehensive, and effective parole system in Illinois. There are numerous reasons why Illinois needs such a parole system. One particularly important reason for bringing parole back to our state is that it would provide a safety valve for all of the wrongfully convicted men and women serving life or lengthy sentences in IDOC who are unable to prove their innocence.

It is beyond dispute that numerous police officers have been responsible for framing hundreds of people over the past several decades, dozens for rape and murder. This has

already cost taxpayers over a billion dollars in jury awards and settlements. In addition to the dozens of men coerced, tortured and framed by officers Jon Burge and Reynaldo Guevara and their crews, Ronald Watts and his crew may be responsible for framing as many as 500-1000 people. In the last year alone, dozens have been exonerated.

It is also beyond dispute that this is only the tip of the iceberg and that proving a wrongful conviction takes, on average, two decades or more. Furthermore, most of the wrongfully convicted will never be able to prove their innocence. Many spend decades in prison or die there unable to ever procure the evidence necessary to exonerate them – especially when police and prosecutors constantly work to

conceal that evidence.

If Illinois had a responsible parole system, many of the people who eventually proved their innocence after 20, 30 or 40 years could have been paroled much sooner. Moreover, those lacking the resources to ever prove their innocence could also find relief. This would reduce not only the harm endured by the wrongfully convicted, but also the unnecessary expenses incurred by taxpayers when wrongly convicted people are unjustly incarcerated for decades on end with no way out.

Sincerely,

Joseph Dole

Josephdole4paroleillinois@gmail.com ■

## TRANSITIONAL SUPPORT

By Marisol Leon

The transition from incarceration to the outside world can be daunting. It is imperative that you start planning your exit strategy long before your release. Getting a support system is also essential. This can be a good time to reconnect with positive people and try to improve relationships that may have deteriorated in the past.

Immediately following your release, you will need to compile basic, yet important documents, such as your birth certificate, social security card and state ID. Senate Bill 3368 allows for you to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles to obtain a State ID. You will be given a verification form by IDOC, granted a fee waiver and given a 90-day grace period from the date of release for you to complete this. Once an ID card is secured, you can apply for your birth certificate and social security card. To obtain your birth certificate you will have to contact the county's clerk office in the district you were born in. You will then be able to set up an appointment with your local Social Security Office to re-secure a new card. Once you have this identification you will be able to access an often-overlooked resource, such as a library card, which grants free internet, computer classes and job boards. This allows you to continue on your re-entry path.

Before your release you'll want to secure a place to live. Potential options are positive family or friends' houses, or a transition house. Begin writing and reaching out to them before your release date. This is critical. In addition to providing a place to live, many transition homes have programs in place to help you with your re-entry. Some can help connect you with training, employment opportunities, counseling, family mediation, re-entry circles, support groups, churches, etc.

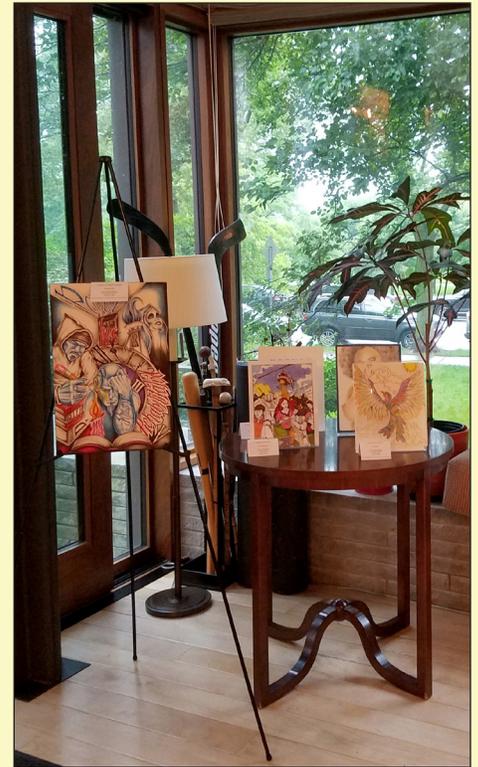
Another critical consideration is health-care. Health insurance is necessary and upon release, you will have a 60-day grace period to enroll in Medicaid. You can apply by visiting the Illinois Health Care website or by calling (800)843-6154.

A good social support system is crucial, please do not minimize the importance of emotional support. You can start by reaching out to organizations such as a church group. Please don't be discouraged if you don't find a good fit the first time, keep trying and find another. There are many good resources out there that are looking to work with those who are re-entering society.

## RAISING FUNDS

Earlier this summer, civil rights attorney Len Goodman kindly opened up his home and hosted a joint fundraiser for Parole Illinois and Stateville Speaks. While those present at this well-attended event enjoyed a shared sense of comradery over food and drinks, the sense of urgency and commitment for prison reform for people on the inside was never far away. Speakers, such as activists and criminal justice reformers Monica Cosby, Bill Ryan and Kilroy Watkins addressed not only the badly needed reforms, but some of the campaigns for change, as well as lawsuits and legislation.

We at Stateville Speaks are thankful for the generous donations received from the fundraiser and in the mail. It has allowed us to continue with still another edition. While we do not litigate or legislate, we are committed to disseminate and promote any positive change, shed light on the negative and give you, our readers, an important platform for your voice to be heard. And while we are always looking for that pivotal donor, as long as there is a need and a want for Stateville Speaks, we will continue to keep plugging along. ■



Photos by Dawn Larsen

An important and overlooked step that can help you reintegrate into the community is to register to vote. In Illinois, once your sentence is complete you can register and vote. This provides engagement between you and the community. Voting gives you a voice, a say, your power as a part of society.

Don't waste the time that you have before you, start getting a plan together now. ■

Do you want to submit an essay, poem, letter or artwork for publication in a future issue of Stateville Speaks? See page 11 for address and submission guidelines.

# WILL I BE READY?

By Michael "Saadiq" Cannon

My name is Michael Cannon, better known as "Brother Saadiq". Come 2019, will mark the end of a 28-year nightmare called incarceration, GOD-WILLING. I've been away from free society for over a quarter "century." That is a very long time...

How has the world changed for a person who got locked up, say in 1970, and was released at the turn of the new millennium in 2000? They came up with so much this and so much that... Well let's see --- during that time-frame color t.v. was invented and to go along with it, some years later they came up with something called "cable t.v." You don't have to cook on the stove anymore because they invented something called a microwave that cooks your food in a matter of seconds!

Not only were touch-tone phones invented (i.e. not the rotary ones we had to "dial"), they came up with this thing called a "cell phone." I wonder why they call it a cell phone when the least thing a person does with it is call and talk to someone? When you do call someone, you can even "see" them!!! It takes photos. It is an address book, your credit cards, a GPS (whatever that is?), a computer with this thing called an internet that they also came up with. They came up with something called a text gadget, so you don't even have to "call" someone and talk to them!

I hear they made cars that "talk" to you, and they say they even have cars that will park themselves. Hell, if it were me, I'd have to see it with my own eyes! Wait a minute, that person IS me, only in a later time-frame, an era of time where technology has advanced so much so that the amount of inventions and changes that have taken place is probably triple-fold more than the era of time I mentioned above!

My epic homecoming is quickly approaching. Will I be ready for the world of time and circumstance when I manifest back into the free atmosphere? Where will I live, what will I do, where will I go??? I was a young man of 29 years when I entered prison. All of my thirties, all of my forties and now more than half of my fifties were lost to long-term imprisonment. Upon my release my age will be 57 years. I will be closer to sixty years young than fifties years old. I say it like that because I'm in great shape, probably in better shape than the average forty-year old man who has been out in the free world indulging in years of drugs, alcohol, loss of proper rest and diet.

Yes, I have been preserved like a dinosaur



Photo by Sal Barry

fully intact, like a woolly mammoth frozen in time found in some remote region of the Andes Mountains. Yes, I'm in great physical, mental and spiritual shape with my moral compass squarely intact. But will it be enough? After all, probably the first thing a prospective employer will notice on my job resume and application is my age and picture an old man with a felony record who hasn't had a job in thirty years.

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## After I'm given \$10 and kicked out into the free world, where will I go?

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Why would he/she choose me when he/she has a pool of young men with an extensive and impressive job history to choose from? Where will I work, how will I eat?

After I'm given the \$10 and kicked out into the free world, where will I go when I get off of the bus in downtown Chicago? After I have stopped at Mickey D's and bought a burger, fries and a soda on the long drive to Chicago and am left with fifty cents in my pocket with cars zooming by and people rushing on their way somewhere at 100 miles a minute, what then? My stomach may be full for a brief moment but I'm sure that "Happy Meal" won't feel so happy if I have nowhere to go from there, meaning no place to live.

I mean all of my immediate family have died and passed on to the spiritual realm of existence, except for one sibling who left me for dead years ago. So...where will I go, will I be homeless? Where will my next meal come

from, will I starve to death, or resort to eating out of garbage cans like so many other homeless people do? And oh wow, what if I get sick? I have no healthcare insurance so will I die in the street gutter?

Without any real answers to these REAL-LIFE issues, will I resort to a life of crime in order to fulfill these needs? After all, the first law of nature is self-preservation, right? Will another human being have to come up short due to my come-up? Will I eat and live to the detriment of another person I have to rob, or do even worse?

Fortunately for me, I won't have to resort to any of these criminal acts because I methodically planned for my future in the free world for the past few years. I didn't just sit on my hands and did the time. I made the time do for me! I obtained my Associate Degree in Liberal Arts College Degree, and I got a vocational trade (Culinary Arts) under my belt. I've drafted business plans from A to Z and I have tried to prepare and plan ahead for all of the things I mentioned above.

But is it enough?! Despite all of my years of planning, I'm sure you all agree that a brother is still going to need a whole lot of aid and assistance when this seal of incarceration is lifted, and I manifest back into the free world.

**Paving the Road** was designed with these issues in mind. We wanted to create a section where we could help you to **Pave the Road** to a successful re-entry and transition back into the free world. Tune in to each and every **Two Roads Newsletter** and let us help you to help yourself! **PLAN...PLAN...PLAN... ■**

# WATKINS

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

obtaining a literacy tutor training certificate, a degree in commercial custodial work and another in construction occupation. I got a certification in anger management. I was working towards a master's degree in business administration but was two classes shy when MacMurray discontinued its educational programs with Pontiac, so I didn't complete it.

Working in the law library gave me the opportunity to gain insight into how the criminal justice system worked – or how it was supposed to work. I realized that a duality existed in the criminal justice system, in which it tends to serve white Americans but not really serve black Americans. Realizing that, it was a struggle to get some type of remedy out of the court. I continued to fight. I litigated all the way up to my release date earlier this year.

The police who tortured me were trained under Commander Jon Burge, now deceased, who trained police to torture suspects into false confessions. Former Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley allowed Burge to create this torture machine, his "Midnight Crew," in order to close cases. And it looked great for media purposes and for political purposes. Daley was the Cook County's State's Attorney when Burge became a police commander, and shot up politically because his record made it look like he was good at prosecuting high-profile cases. But he needed bodies in order to do that. What Burge and his men did paid off for a lot of white police officers and prosecutors. Bodies of black boys from poor, marginalized neighborhoods were being exploited. This happened for years.

Burge's torture ring went as far back as 1972. The city of Chicago gives this false narrative that the torture stopped with Burge's firing in 1993, but it continued a lot longer than that; possibly as late as 2006. African American boys were tortured into false confessions, prosecuted in courts, and incarcerated. What was unique about my situation was that Anita Alvarez, who became Cook County's State Attorney in 2008, was my trial prosecutor. Judges in the county did not want to touch my case once she became an elected official. There was much denial involved.

A report released later revealed that the same detectives who tortured me did so to many other black men who were convicted. The report explains how the prosecutors laid out this pattern of perjury, and about the collusion between the State's Attorney and the detectives. They found evidence that former Chicago Mayor Daley was aware of the torture and went out of his way to cover it up.

While I was incarcerated, I continued to litigate. I continued to try to get the documents that would support that I was coerced into signing a false confession. This is what the city fought so hard against, because they knew as long as we couldn't get access to the documents to substantiate our claim, that judges wouldn't re-examine my case.

I submitted FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests to the city, probably four or five times. And they gave me run-of-the-mill answers: that my request was too burdensome, or the that the documents were not available, or that I had a pending criminal case and I needed to get the documents in discovery. I finally threatened to sue the city to comply with FOIA because these were public documents that I was asking for; Chicago Police Department misconduct files that outlined the pattern and practice

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## It was a struggle to get some type of remedy out of the court, but I continued to fight until my release date this year.

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of torture. The city adamantly refused to give me these documents because the State's Attorney's Office did not want to release them. So, I initiated the suit and it ended up snowballing. The lower court dismissed it. I appealed, and this is where everything got interesting.

The attorneys of Lovey and Lovey took my case pro bono. They prepared a brief to submit to the appellate court, and the judges ruled unanimously that I was entitled to those documents because they should have been given to me under FOIA. The judges told the City of Chicago that they could not prove that the police misconduct files were not public information. But a few days later, the judges reversed their own decision without any explanation.

We don't know who they got a phone call from, or what made them change their minds. The judges were trying to protect these police misconduct files. It shows you how systemic, and how many institutions are involved, in protecting these cops. So, we went to the Illinois Supreme Court, which told the Appellate Court to reinstate my appeal. The city realized that they were in a lose-lose situation, so they provided me with the documents of the police misconduct files.

My next big challenge came in 2015. I filed a declaratory judgement against Anita Alvarez. Since my incarceration, every year something new would come out in the media

about police torture that the state never shared with me or my attorney. I continued to send FOIA requests. I'd ask for all the documents involved with the officers and their history of misconduct. They'd always play like they didn't know what I was talking about. Finally, I found that the Office of Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan oversees what's called the Public Access Counselor, who is responsible for making a public body comply with state law. Often, the Attorney General's Office does not enforce the Cook County State's Attorney to comply with FOIA requests. So, I named Madigan as a defendant, along with Alvarez.

The Cook County State's Attorneys Office tried to claim that they were a part of the Judicial Branch of government, and therefore not subject to FOIA requests, when in the Illinois Constitution, they are clearly part of the Executive Branch of government. The Illinois Supreme Court caught this error and pointed out that the various counties' states attorney's offices were part of the executive branch of government and are subject to FOIA.

That cut the legs from that argument, so they had to come up with a new reason why I should not be entitled to my criminal discovery file. They tried to claim that it would threaten the safety of the officers, or potential witnesses, if they disclosed it – even though it is over 20 years later. But they'd never elaborate. Nevertheless, myself and Lovey and Lovey defeated them again. And the judge told them that they must disclose all remaining criminal discovery files under my indictment, which turned out to be over 5,000 pages of documents.

Some of these documents I was already familiar with, but a lot of them I was not. The State's Attorney's Office was aware that the witness they used in court was never present at the scene of the crime. She was a 15-year old girl, and in her testimony, she said that she wasn't there. She signed a document that implicated me in the crime because she was told that she could go home if she signed it. She was forced to be a witness, and she was treated as a hostile witness on the stand. Prosecutors told the judge that she was recanting her statement because she was afraid of retaliation, while the girl told the grand jury that the signed statement was not her statement.

Reports from other witnesses say that the girl was not there. When I won my FOIA suit, I was also given the transcripts and documents from my co-defendant's case. I learned that his attorney impeached a prosecutor in the State's Attorney's Office who wrote out statements and had witnesses sign them. The attorney for my co-defendant noticed that in the statements

of three witnesses who allegedly saw me commit a crime, that none of them mentioned the fourth girl, the 15-year old whose statement implicated me in the murder. These were all high school students, who could read and write, but they were not allowed to write their own statements to sign.

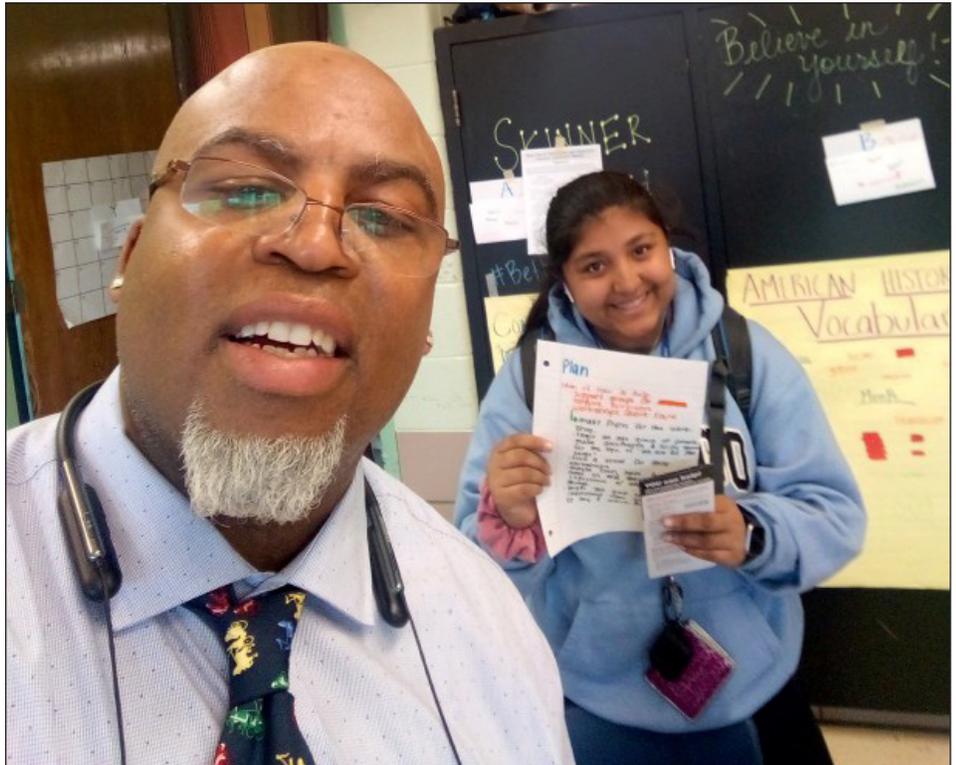
As a result of this lawsuit, I could see what was manufactured by the police and the State's Attorney's Office. I could see what was fabricated and now claim perjury, because it was plain as day. All of this was the result of me digging in and fighting in this battle against this wrongful murder conviction. Despite this evidence, the court is still trying to make a determination on my innocence.

On January 25, 2019, I was released from prison. I continue to litigate my case. It's still ongoing before the Supreme Court of Cook County. The question before the court is whether or not I have provided rediscovered evidence of actual innocence; if the conviction should be tossed out.

But in the process, I'm also waiting for my report from the Illinois Torture Inquiry and Relief Commission (TIRC). They contacted me and said they were prepared to release it. The complaint was filed in 2011. It's 2019. Since my release, I go every time the TIRC hears claims. I've told them my stress and frustrations with their delays and ask why they cannot release my report when they've already released reports involving my detectives who were found to have more than 80 claims of torture against them combined. I feel that they are just sandbagging it for other reasons. I made it to parole, and they still haven't given me the report. I was supposed to get my report on August 21, but then I was contacted and told that they don't have enough commissioners to hear my claim. There are supposed to be seven commissioners, but two left, and one is in conflict of interest because he worked on my case back in 1992.

Much of my family chose to leave Illinois while I was imprisoned. My mother became concerned about my other siblings, and the level of police violence and gang violence in Chicago. When I was released, I had to find my own way through the city; find out how to start my life over.

The city created a narrative that they will provide reparations to torture survivors – but only for those who can prove that Burge was involved in their torture, up to 1991. Those who were tortured after 1991, such as me, are not included in that reparation package. Neither the city nor the state is assisting with housing or employment. All my support comes from



*Watkins is a guest speaker at schools around Chicago. Here he is with a student who was so inspired that she came up with a plan on how to start her own social justice organization.*

St. Leonard's Ministries, which has numerous resources and programs to help me with my transition.

I'm still unemployed. It's really difficult to find employment because I'm a convicted murderer. I had electronic monitoring for 120 days after my release. I had to complete an anger management course. I am on Mandatory Supervised Release (MSR) – what was formerly called parole – for three years.

However, Cook County took this further, and now requires that return parolees register with the Chicago Police Department for something called the Violent Offenders Against Youth Registry. This is a registry of offenders who committed crimes against minors and live in Cook County. If I change home addresses or go to school during the next 10 years, I have to pay a fee to update that information with the police. This is arbitrary and punitive, as there were no minors under 18 involved in my alleged crime.

Because I acquired so much knowledge and information about the criminal justice system, the systemic practice of police violence, and other related issues during my incarceration, I have been able to help and advise others. I work with numerous organizations in trying to help them form bills and ideas about how they can assist long-term prisoners, as well as torture survivors, who return home.

I currently sit on the survivors' advisory council for the Chicago Torture Justice Center. I also am involved with the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Oppression, who recently gave a petition to Governor Pritzker to release all torture survivors from prison. I'm working with Parole Illinois, who is trying to bring back the parole board for seniors and long-term prisoners. I'm also working with the Center for Racial Justice, who is trying to draw up legislation so that the Chicago Police Board would be elected instead of appointed. We know that if they are appointed, there's a lot of nepotism and favoritism with their cronies; it's just law enforcement overseeing law enforcement. We should have a voice on who should sit on the Police Board and create police oversight.

I do keynote speaking. I was invited to the John Howard Association as a guest speaker. I was also contracted by the University of Chicago to speak as a torture survivor and long-term prisoner. I speak at middle schools and high schools on the issue of police violence, as well as criminal justice bias and the need for criminal justice reform. I talk to kids about transitioning to life out of prison, and how to overcome suffering and not be broken by it. Finding a light, locking into that light, and letting it be your path. ■

-As told to Sal Barry



## HER EYES By John Martin

She needed me to look at her.  
She needed me to look into her eyes so I could see how much pain I'd caused her.  
She wanted me to look into her eyes so that I could recognize that I had ripped out a piece of her heart.  
She needed me to see this, even though I'd never seen her before in my life.  
At first, I couldn't, I wouldn't.

I noticed her during the jury selection process, but paid very little attention to the young white woman due to the throng of prospective jurors being ushered in, impaneled or dismissed. I was too busy trying to look innocent in my brand new suit, with my shiny leather shoes – my little Afro, picked out to symmetrical perfection.

I was able to frown with an intellectual understanding of whatever nonsense came out of my judge's mouth, as if the look on my face could be introduced into evidence as proof of my innocence. I'd stare incredulously at prosecutors as they told my jury the truth about me. I'd stare smugly at the police in the gallery who arrested me almost four years earlier for first degree murder, home invasion and armed robbery, as if all the evidence they had on me still wouldn't be enough. I'd shrug, dumbfounded, smiling at my elderly mother who was there in support of me, reassuring her that all was well, even when a fingerprint left in blood on the victim's glasses was a match to me.

### No big deal, mama.

The young woman's eyes never left me. She needed me to see her. She was probably 25 years old in 1997, had long brown hair that she kept in a severely tight ponytail, and her large brown eyes would have been pretty had they not been bloodshot and brimming with tears from rage and lack of sleep.

Her jaws and temples throbbed with anguish and a thick vein pulsed from the tip of her widow's peak to right above her left eyebrow.

### Pain.

Her tormented glare was so unnerving that at first, I couldn't do anything but steal quick glances at her, acting as if I was looking past her at the cop sitting behind her, or the reporter sitting next to her.

### No matter what was happening in that courtroom, she never took her eyes off of me.

Regardless of how the evidence seemed to clear me one moment or condemn me the next; regardless of the prosecutor's explosive bombshells, or my lawyer's hyperbolic histrionics – she watched me. She paid attention to nothing else. Her eyes only followed me. They bore into me. They seethed at me, the young black man that killed her friend. She made it hard to breathe.

She made it hard for me to be anything other than what I truly was, and forced me to observe the pain I caused. Her eyes told me I owed her and everyone like her the decency of looking her in the eye so I could see their pain. She did not give a damn about anything else going on in that courtroom.

She knew I did it. I knew I did it, and she wanted my acknowledgement of that. That's what her eyes said to me.

When my verdict was read, I swallowed hard, predictably being found guilty on all counts. The news still made me numb. I'd taken so much from so many, directly and indirectly, because of my actions. It made it hard for me to look anyone in the eye. Yet, I gritted my teeth and sat up as the jurors were being polled, one by one.

### I would only look into her eyes.

"Juror number one, is this your verdict?" the judge asked. "Yes, your honor", juror number one said. "Juror number two, is this your verdict?" "Yes, your honor." And so on. As I slowly turned to face her, she sat stock upright as every juror said that his or her verdict was true and correct. The vein in her forehead subsided, her color returned, and her eyes were tinged with a bit of relief.

She needed me to know that the human being I killed was loved.  
Was missed.  
Was needed.  
Was better than me.

I stood to leave the courtroom under heavy escort, and she stood with me, our eyes not parting until the final door swung shut between us. The steel door to the holding tank I was placed in alone clanged shut. For the first time in almost four years, I wept. ■

## HAVING FAITH IN HAPPINESS      A NEW LINE IS DRAWN

By Peter Saunders

I awoke this morning  
to find my friend Mr. Sun  
so I gathered my pennies  
in search of some fun.

I then went on a journey  
for a magical kite  
one that was fearless  
with determination and might.

As I put it together  
and tied the string  
the sun disappeared  
and the wind began to sing.

Then a storm appeared  
on my bright, sunny day  
but my kite said don't worry  
I'll lead the way.

As the violent wind thrashed  
and beat up my kite  
my feet left the ground  
and I soared in flight.

I closed my eyes tight  
for fear of the unknown  
however, after I landed  
I felt much at home.

The storm was now over  
and the sun was bold  
I was at the end of a rainbow  
sitting in a pot of gold.

I thought my day was ruined  
and pennies didn't amount to much  
but having faith in happiness  
I knew I'd find such. ■

By Jonathon Meskauskas

Both the U.S. Supreme Court and the Illinois Supreme Court have stated that society draws the line at 18 when refusing to extend the principles announced in *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 U.S. 460 to those over the age of 18 when they committed their crime. (See *People v. Harris*, 2018 IL 121932 at paragraph 54 (Oct. 18, 2018); *Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. at 574, 125 S. Ct.1183.

However, the Illinois legislature just redrew the line that society traditionally drew at 18. House Bill 531 was signed into law, as Public Act 100-1182. This new law states that most people who were under 21 when they committed their crime and sentenced after the effective date of the Public Act, are eligible for parole. The legislature has finally listened to what social scientists are saying – the brain does not fully develop until a person is in his or her mid-twenties.

Although the new Public Act is not retroactive, you can still use it in your as applied or facial, constitutional challenge to your sentence to point out that society no longer draws the line at 18, but now 21. If you were under the age of 21 when you committed your crime you may be entitled to a re-sentencing hearing. If you are re-sentenced after the effective date of Public Act 100-1182 you will also be entitled to a parole hearing. ■

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# POLITICAL 'TOON BY ARKEE



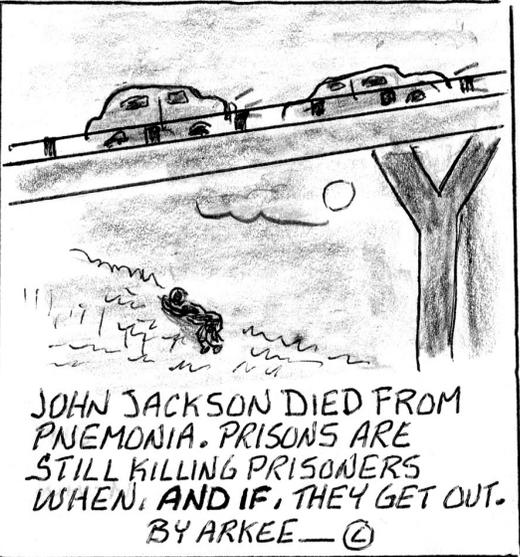
HE TURNED TO THE EMPLOYMENT OFFICE TO GET A JOB.



"SORRY, BUT YOU'RE TOO OLD, AND YOU BEEN IN PRISON."

JOHN JACKSON JUST GOT OUT OF PRISON, AFTER SERVING 50 YEARS. HE HAD NO ONE TO TURN TO. ALL OF HIS FAMILY MEMBERS HAD PASSED.

HE NEEDED A PLACE TO LAY HIS HEAD, SO HE SLEPT BENEATH VIADUCTS.



JOHN JACKSON DIED FROM PNEUMONIA. PRISONS ARE STILL KILLING PRISONERS WHEN, AND IF, THEY GET OUT.  
BY ARKEE — ©

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