

Testimony of Lynette Grace as an **INTERESTED PARTY** to HB 394
House Criminal Justice Committee, May 21, 2018

Dear Chairman Manning and members of the Committee:

I am eager to share my story as it relates to House Bill 394. I believe all children sent to adult prison should have opportunities to demonstrate that they are ready to be granted parole and be re-integrated back into society. I offer this support 27 years after my dear friend and Spiritual Mother that we affectionately called Sister Bell's 16 year old Son Johnny stabbed her to death during the course of an argument. Afterwards, Johnny stabbed me several times.

In August 1991, after receiving word of my mother's death, I returned home to Toledo, Ohio from Atlanta Georgia to attend my mother's funeral. After Church Service, I spend time with Sister Bell and her family and I spent the night at her house. At about 6:00 a.m., that morning I awoke to hear what I thought to be an argument between Sister Bell and her Son Johnny. The last thing I heard Sister Bell say was "Johnny, no!" Then there was silence.

I got out of bed, opened the bedroom door, and peeked out. I saw Sister Bell's Son, Johnny across the hall. I asked Johnny if I could go to the basement to check on his mother. He agreed. I found my friend lying face down on the floor, covered in blood. When I asked Johnny "what happened", he said he didn't know. Not knowing what else to do I went back upstairs. As I crossed the kitchen area Johnny began stabbing me. In an attempt to calm down I assured him that everything would be okay. Before he struck me again for some unknown reason he stopped stabbing me and left the kitchen.

When he left the room that was my opportunity to escape. I unlocked the back door and began running down the street knocking on doors trying to get help for Sister Bell. By the time help arrived she had died.

In August 2011, 20 years later I discovered that Johnny was eligible for a parole hearing. I had always wanted to talk to him about why he killed his mother and why he stabbed me. I felt as though I needed answers to questions about what happened that morning that only he could answer. I sent him a letter and asked if I could visit him. He responded with a lengthy letter of apology but he also agreed to see me.

I didn't know what I would say to Johnny after all those years. I went into the visiting room and I found that chubby-faced boy, Johnny of 27 years ago had grown into an articulate, respectful and thoughtful young man. I eventually got the courage to ask Johnny why he stabled his mother. He told me that they were arguing and the argument escalated into him killing her. I asked why he stabbed me. He said he was scared.

Johnny told me that because of the nature of the crime, I was the last person he expected to visit him in prison. I learned something even more important during our conversation. I found out that Johnny was not the monster I thought he was. He told me about the abuse and trauma he had experienced before the attack. He shared his frustration of being molested by a woman on his paper route, who fed him milk and cookies before she sexually abused him. I also was the first person he told that his step-father beat him often and threatened to kill the entire family if Johnny ever told anyone about the beatings. Before I became Johnny's victim he himself was being

victimized.

During that visit, Johnny cried more than I did. He said he loved his mother, and that neither she nor I deserved what he did to us. He asked me if I would ever be willing to forgive him for his actions against me? I let him know that “yes,” Johnny I forgive you. He said my visits and forgiving him finally enabled him to be able to forgive himself and to heal as well. One may ask why I choose to forgive Johnny. It is because un-forgiveness keeps the pain alive, repeating itself over and over again and I refuse to be in bondage to mistakes of the past.

Johnny takes full responsibility for his actions and with our story he wants to help others be able to forgive themselves and to heal. Despite this desire, he remains in prison.

Johnny has served 27 years for his mother’s death and is slated to serve the next 15 years for felonious assault for his attack on me. I have testified before the parole board representative three times, telling them that all has been forgiven and I would like to see Johnny released from prison. Johnny went before the parole board on April 20th 2016, for the 9th time. He has not been in segregation and he has no gang affiliation. He was in the honor block and the corrections officers asked him to come to the Super Merit block to be their head porter.

Prior to being the head porter Johnny was the Institution’s only licensed staff barber. He has taken the classes that the parole board required. Johnny also enjoys playing Chess. It is as though the man he has become is invisible. What is dwelled upon and he is continually being punished for is the frustrated 16 year old teenager he was 27 years ago.

In my ignorance I thought that with me being Mr. Bell’s victim and speaking on his behalf would make a difference to the Parole Board. But I have found that my voice didn’t matter. Hopefully my voice will matter with you today.

House Bill 394 can allow us to hold children accountable for the harm they have caused without committing funds that could be used for other needs or requiring that people die in prison for mistakes they made as children. Neither guarantees children’s release, only a chance to demonstrate they have changed. It has been my honor to speak with you today regarding this bill. I support the youth parole provisions in HB 394.

Sincerely,

Lynette D. Grace
Columbus, Ohio