

Testimony of Lynette Grace in **SUPPORT** of SB 272
Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee, May 11, 2016

Dear Chairman Coley and members of the Committee:

I am eager to express my wholehearted support for Senate Bill 272, which would ensure that all children sent to adult prison have opportunities to demonstrate that they are ready to be granted parole and be re-integrated back into society.

I offer this support 25 years after my dear friend and Spiritual Mother that we affectionately called Sister Bell's 16 year old Son Johnny Bell attacked and killed her during the course of an argument. Afterwards, Johnny stabbed me several times.

My story began in August 1991 when my father called me at work and told me that my mother had died of a heart attack. I flew from Atlanta, Georgia, where I was living, to my hometown of Toledo. After my mother's funeral I wanted to go to Church and spend time with Sister Bell and her family before returning to work in Atlanta.

After Church Service, Sister Bell prepared her usual scrumptious Sunday dinners. The dessert that Sister Bell was recognized for all over the Church was her Red Velvet cake. She and I laughed and talked, it felt good, it was just like old times. After losing my own biological mother it felt good to know that I still had her as my Spiritual Mother.

That evening after we all went to bed about 6:00 a.m. I awoke to hear what I thought to be an argument between Sister Bell and her Son Johnny. The last thing I heard was Sister Bell say was "Johnny, no!" Then there was silence.

I got up, put on my glasses and walked to the bedroom door. I slowly opened the bedroom door and peeked out. I saw Sister Bell's Son, Johnny across the hall. Since I had assumed he and his mother were having an argument. I did not want to pry, but I was concerned about my friend. Not knowing what else to say I asked Johnny if his mother was having a bad dream and if I could go to the basement to check on her. He agreed.

As I investigated, 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 and as I was crossing the kitchen area Johnny began stabbing me. I told him to calm down and assured him that everything would be okay. Before he struck me again for some unknown reason he stopped stabbing me and left the kitchen area.

With him leaving the room, that was my opportunity to flee. 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 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 stabbed me. I needed answers to questions about what happened that morning that only he could answer. I hoped to talk to him before he left prison, so 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 submitted the Institution's Visitor's Application and was approved.

I didn't know what I would say to Johnny after all those years. I went into the visiting room and found him among the other inmates. In the two decades since I had last seen him, the troubled child had grown into a tall, slender, well-groomed young man. I sat down across from him, with a little square wooden table separating us, and extended my hand. Not knowing what else to say, I asked if he remembered me. He said he did and that I still looked the same. He told me about prison life as we evaded the conversation about what happened that morning in 1991.

In talking with him I found that chubby-faced boy, Johnny of 25 years ago had grown into an articulate, respectful and thoughtful young man. I wondered what roads had he taken in his life that lead him to prison.

I eventually got the courage to ask Johnny why he stabled his mother. He told me that they had a conflict about Johnny using the phone. His mother did not want him on the phone because he was under house arrest for some trouble he had gotten into. That morning, she caught him on the phone again. They argued 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 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 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 25 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. In 2011, the first time I met with a parole representative I took a letter of support to let them know all has been forgiven between he and I. When board members realized I was the victim, my visits with Johnny were discontinued. By then, we had already had seven very successful visits. Our goal should be to bring about healing to everyone involved, and punishing victims who support release of their offenders does not further that goal.

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. He has taken the Victim's awareness program, Cage Your Rage, Thinking for a Change and Life Skills. Johnny also enjoys playing Chess.

His only infraction is a lie that he told three years ago in 2013 that is still be held against him in 2016. For this he was given another three years by the parole board. In 2019 when he is scheduled to see the board again that infraction will still appear on his record. It is as though the man he has become is invisible. What is dwelled upon and he is continually punished for is the frustrated 16 year old teenager he was 25 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 board. But I have found that my voice didn't matter. Hopefully it will today with you.

We know from adolescent development research that because their brains are still developing, children are less capable than adults to control their impulses, think through the long-term consequences of their actions, or avoid pressure from peers and adults. We also know that they possess a unique capacity for growth and rehabilitation. Johnny is proof of this.

Children make serious mistakes. As a person of faith, I believe we are called to forgive those who harm us. Redemption is a basic tenet of nearly every major religion.

Senate Bill 272 will 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 these two bills and I urge our legislature to pass this bill.

Sincerely,

Lynette D. Grace
Columbus, Ohio