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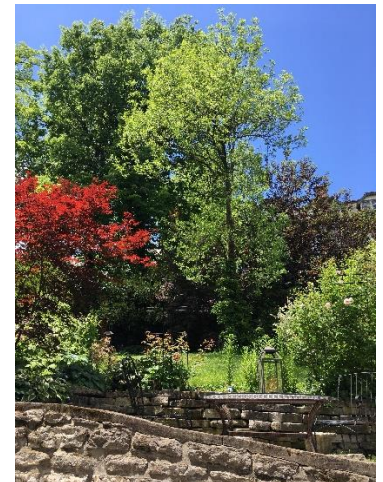
Testimony in **Support** of **SB 256**
Regards Sentencing Offenders Under 18 When Committed Offense
House Criminal Justice Committee

Good morning Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the Criminal Justice Committee.

My name is Stefanie Tengler, I am 34 years old, and I work as a teacher in Cincinnati, Ohio. Since 2012, I have been engaged to a young man named Joshua. Josh is a juvenile lifer here in the state of Ohio, where he was sentenced to 56-years-to-life for a crime he committed when he was 16 years old.

I am here today not to talk about Josh's troublesome childhood (the fact that he witnessed prostitution, gun violence, and substance abuse on a daily basis, that his father was addicted to crack cocaine, or that his uncle sexually abused him countless times - the reasons why Josh turned to the streets and ended up taking a young man's life). I am also not here today to explain the remorse Josh feels (living day in and day out hating himself and wishing that he could turn back time). Neither am I here today to talk about the rehabilitation Josh has experienced (training service dogs for veterans and children with special needs, completing one job program after another, tending to the prison's community garden, and participating in university courses at the prison). [I will happily share testimonies with you that I have submitted on those things in previous General Assemblies.]

I am here today to talk about the collateral damage that comes with sentencing teens to die in prison. I am here today to talk about my own pain. In February this year, I became a homeowner. I bought a charming, old, almost 100 year old, house with a very lovely backyard, as you can see in the pictures.



Although I love my new home, I have come to resent it quite a bit. It makes life for both Josh and I significantly harder, because we both spend our days imagining how beautiful it could be, if we were able to share our home together. But we're not. Josh has been incarcerated for almost 16 years, and as current law stands, he will not be parole eligible until 2061, when he is 72 years old. I have been with him for a little over nine years now and to think that I may never get to be with him in person, that I may never get to walk around our home with him, is absolutely excruciating. But this is not where my pain stops. It hardly scratches the surface.

On April 4th this year, I learned that Covid-19 had entered the prison system. A couple of days later, Josh started showing symptoms. He and 1,300 others contracted the virus, but Josh thankfully ended up having only a mild case. Others were not so lucky. By the summer, 37 people had died at the prison where Josh is incarcerated. Despite everything, Josh remains composed and hardworking as always. He is one of a 12-member cleaning crew that has worked tirelessly to keep the prisoners and staff safe during this uncertain time. Josh was trained in the disposal of biohazard waste, and has volunteered to clean the entire prison for as long as necessary. He is cleaning the prison as I stand here and talk to you. He wears a full body suit and a face mask respirator to be safe. It's not an understatement when I say that the past 8 months have been pure hell for me.

I have felt hopeless quite a few times before. Some years ago, I had to tell Josh that one of his cousins had committed suicide, that his grandmother had passed away, and that his little brother was brutally beaten to death. I could not be there for Josh when sharing any of these devastating news with him. As a matter of fact, after Josh was allowed to call me from the prison's chapel so I could tell him about his little brother's murder, the prison put Josh on suicide watch. To this day, I don't know how either Josh or I endured this pain. He was placed in a small cell with nothing to do and nobody to talk to. And I was at home, losing my mind, because I could not be there for him during one of the darkest moments of his life.

It's funny. I have told my story so many times, that -sometimes- I don't shed a single tear over it anymore. It's not because I'm not in pain. It's because I am in so much pain, and I am so numb, that I am on autopilot at this point. I would love to have a normal life again at some point, and I know that the many families of juvenile lifers in our state would love the same thing. We understand that our loved ones deserve to be punished, but please, let's hold them accountable in an age-appropriate way, and provide them with an opportunity to tell their stories again after serving 25 years. Please give us some hope and vote yes on SB 256.

