

TWO ROADS

Volume 19



Part III

THE TRUTH IN SENTENCING ISSUE

Part Two of the stories and service of the incarcerated men and women of the Illinois Department of Corrections

To All Readers

Our monthly newsletter focuses on three phases: *rehabilitation*, *restoration and re-entry*. These are the necessary phases of a successful incarceration and transition back into society.

Rehabilitation involves the struggle for change one confronts during incarceration.

Restoration reflects the refined version of one's self that we've become and our restored self seeks service of self-worth to the world.

Finally, *Re-Entry* is the ultimate goal one accomplishes through class study, self-study or modification programs completed during one's incarceration.

We are TWO ROADS, and we want to be a viable resource for our readers. We serve you by sharing the honest chronicle of the stories and service of the incarcerated women and men of the Illinois Department of Corrections. Join our movement.

TWO ROADS Editorial Staff

****Please Note:** All letters, emails and photos will be reviewed by personnel **PRIOR** to being received by the TWO ROADS editorial staff. All information that is not pertaining to TWO ROADS will be discarded and not returned. Please respect the guidelines.

TWO ROADS

Our Mission Statement

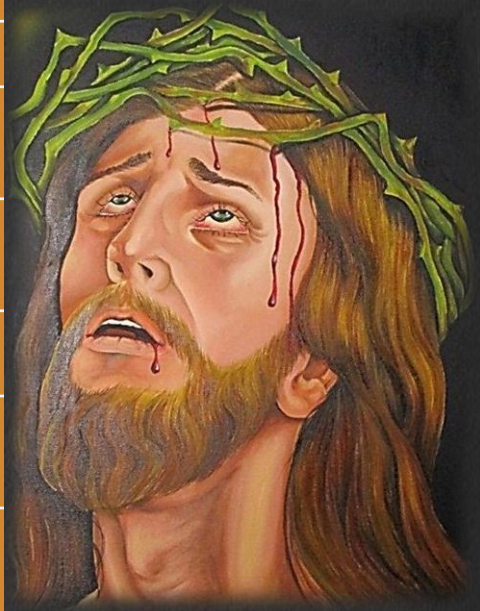
“We are committed to empowering those most impacted by harmful systems to become dynamic leaders and agents of change. Using the connecting, restorative power of these stories, we hope to do our part in bringing us all together to overcome societal ills, such as violence, poverty and mass incarceration.”



Table of Contents

Part II

<i>Editor's Take</i> – Keith "Aquil" Talley	6
<i>A Message From</i> – Krysta Donoho	8
<i>"The Road Less Traveled"</i> – Karl Fell	10
<i>"Accountability"</i> – Demetrice Phillips	11
<i>"A Tale Called 'Truth' and 'Sentencing'"</i> – Yusef Kareem Brown	14
<i>"Why Should I Be Paroled"</i> – Abdul Riley	16
<i>"My Life's at Stake"</i> – VanDaire Knox	23
<i>"Truth-In-Sentencing Don't Work"</i> – Eric Smeader	25
<i>"The Ripple Effects and Cruelty of Truth in Sentencing (and human toll and impact on society and the victimization it has thus far caused the innocent)"</i> – Arturo Viegua	27
<i>"Blessed With a Natual Life Sentence"</i> – Anthony Spencer, Sr.	29
<i>"Speaking The Truth In Love"</i> – Kareem J. Cobbins	34
<i>"Time for a Change"</i> – Ray Guereca	36
<i>A Message From</i> – Robert Belz	38
<i>"Registry Americana"</i> – Timothy Peterson	40
<i>"Repeal Truth In Sentencing"</i> – Nicholas Chittick	41



Created by Charles Murray



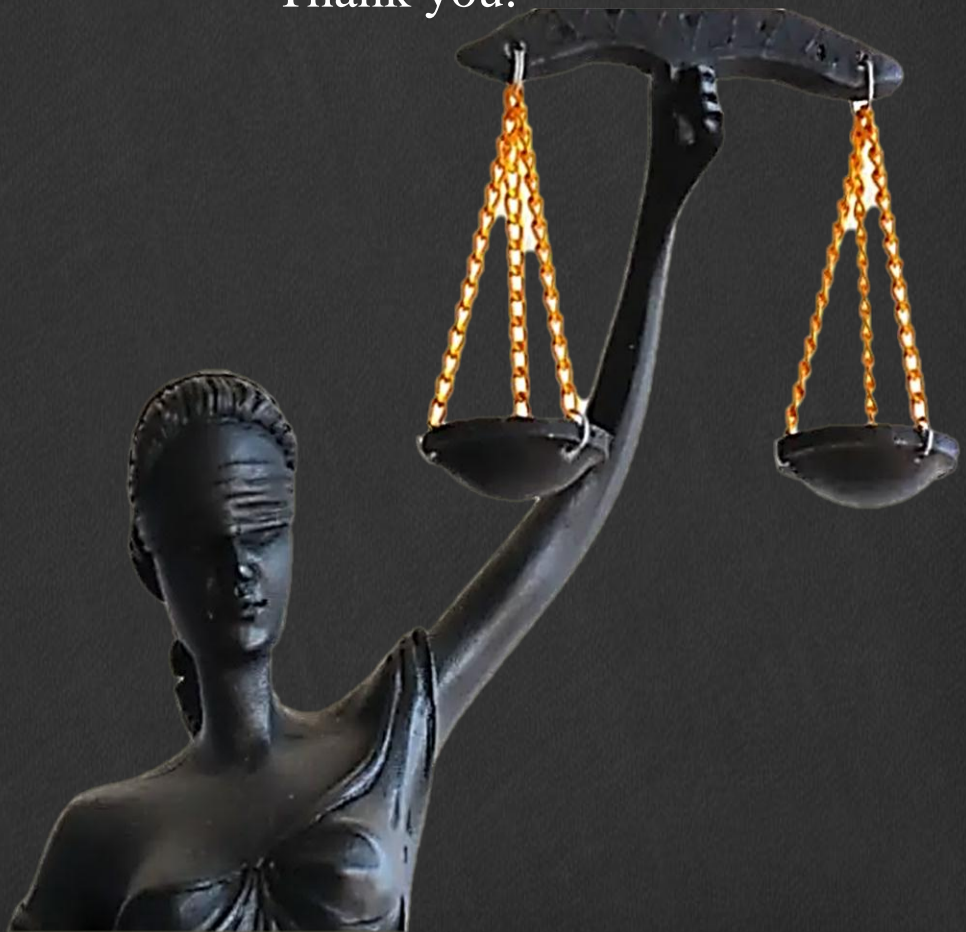
TWO ROADS

TRUTH IN SENTENCING ISSUE

DISCLAIMER

TWO ROADS is built for bringing integrity and honesty about the people who are submitting their stories. There are times where the editors are required to make changes due to spelling errors or grammatical structure. Please know that **we will never take away your voice**, however, understand that we take pride in our work and strive to be the best in our representation of your voice.

Thank you.



Editor's Take

I'm a Survivor??

Harm, in response to harm, produces and guarantees the continuation of harm. “Truth in Sentencing,” a legislative response to community harm, is harmful – continues to harm – and will undoubtedly generate ripples of generational harm that will endure long after it has been abolished.

One might find these comments strange coming from an individual who actually receives “good time;” however, because I am also a member of the community, I too have been negatively impacted. Being graciously given the opportunity to regain years of my life back, while men in the same trenches with me – some who are my family of choice – are denied the same opportunity and allowed to languish further, often causes me to experience feelings of “Survivor’s Guilt.”

Yes, I am aware that those feelings are irrational and, in the extreme, harmful. And make no mistakes, I am in no way

comparing my indirect experience with the pain, angst and struggle directly endured by others and their families; nevertheless, I do empathetically feel their pain on a deep visceral level because I am them, and they are Me!

Once published, we strongly encourage that you or someone on your support team send a link of the issue to your respective state representative, and if you feel up to it, the entire General Assembly.

OUR VOICES AND THEIR VOTES MATTER!

Lastly, on behalf of the Two Roads e-zine, I would like to acknowledge and personally thank Mr. Brian Lehnert who, immediately upon his arrival here at Kewanee, passionately campaigned for us to produce this issue. Thank you!



Keith "Aquil" Talley
Editor Emeritus
TWO ROADS

A Message From... Krysta Donoho

Logan

My name is Kyrsta Donoho. I am 37 years old and I have been incarcerated in Illinois Department of Corrections since I was 21. I'm held on "accountability" to 1st degree murder and I was sentenced to 45 years at 100%. I was 20 when my crime was committed.

For almost 17 years now, I have an outstanding support system. Family and friends who have stood by my side since day 1. I have fought so hard and begged for mercy from the Court...I've accumulated so many days, that if I were under the old law, I'm sure I would be well past my out date.

I have no children and with an outdate as far away as mine, I'll never be able to experience motherhood. I've missed my sister's wedding...growing up, we had always said we'd be others maid of honor. I missed 2 of her 3 children being born. I've missed so much in the last 17 years.

I just keep praying for a second chance...a chance to redeem myself and show everyone that I am not my past; that I am a changed woman. Truth-In-Sentencing takes away your hope.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

It allows you to be a product of your environment. It gives nothing to look forward to and in spite of all of that, I still strive to be the best version of me.

We're not waiting for a miracle to happen and when it does, I hope that this time we're (Truth-In-Sentencing individuals) included. I say that to say this: new laws being passed today are not retroactive. They're not applying to any of us who are "stuck" in the system. A person doesn't need 30 or 40 years to be rehabilitated.

Statistics show something else. There is a 1% recidivism rate for individuals who serve more than 10 years. Is that what the system is afraid of? Fear of the doors NOT revolving for us "long timers" - I am a ward of the state and if I serve out my entire sentence, I will **STILL** be a ward of the state as a free woman simply because no one is going to hire a 66 year old, inexperienced woman. I'm hopeful that tomorrow is always my second chance.

The Road Less Traveled

Karl Fell

Taylorville

So, I am not from this state, but yet, here I am. I had came to see family and help a friend while in Illinois. I met two women and we were having a good time until the end of the evening when they told me that I needed to pay them \$1000 or they were going to call the police and say I raped them.

I spent the next 568 days in the county jail, and my lawyer and judge knew that I was put in jail on the lies. Well, none of that mattered. I ended up taking a plea that netted my class X felony for 8½ years at 85% under the Truth-In-Sentencing law.

My wife went into a deep depression. She stopped walking the dogs and cleaning behind the other pets. She even stop going outside for her daily walks. Now, its to the point where she is now in assisted living. I can truthfully say that this has caused me depression as well. Like when the DA told me that "*\$200,000 could make this go all away.*" I have lost the will because there is no point in doing school or programs when I can't even get good time for them. I am 50 years old and I am at a loss of words for life. Everything is gone. This is my road...

Accountability

Demetrice Phillips

Illinois River

My name is Demetrice Phillips and I would like to speak about Truth-In-Sentencing laws and their effect on families of incarcerated people. I've been incarcerated since 2006, found guilty under the unjust and overreaching Accountability Law. Though I had no weapon and committed no actual act/crime, I was sentence to 35 years at 100%; although I had no gun, 15 years of the sentence is applied **mandatory** because a gun was used.

While incarcerated, I've lost several family members, including my auntie that raised me in *Isaqueens Projects* in Mississippi. I've watched my kids, family and friends grow and change through picture. It hurts and I'm not exclusive for there for hundreds of us who have made strides over many years to grow as humans and show maturity and rehabilitation.

Many, including myself, continue to positively grow and pray for a chance to prove them even when it seems we have no "real" opportunity for redemption and to prove ourselves to a society as a whole and our family who suffers as well.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

Now, at 40 years of age, I can tell you “all” childish thoughts are removed and mortality becomes more and more in focus, and with that comes the urgency to spend whatever years that are left with my loved ones, like my mother, who is 63 years old and father, who is 66 years old; Both of whom have health issues.

I’ve been blessed that my children have had a great support system growing up, so they are doing great, but not all incarcerated people have the same situation or story, which in turn can have a negative effect on a child. I know I CARE about my children and most guys I’ve met feel the same way.

So even though it may not be out of hatred or maliciousness, a lot of time kids are influenced to do things that a parent would more than likely advise against. My point is when giving these overly extreme sentences; one should have some compassion for each situation and determine “*does that individual truly need to be sentenced to death in prison or to be dependently old upon release from prison?*”

Especially in cases like mine...Accountability, where I committed no actual act against the victim or anyone else. I feel remorse for the mother and will always feel and express remorse for the death of the victim. I don’t want any part of my statement to reflect differently. I also want to express

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

“I’m a human” and as a young person, most humans have made mistakes, although maybe not as severe.

I would like to pose a question: “*Are you the same as your WORST ACTION?*” If not, imagine if you were incapacitated for 10 or 20 years, etc. ...C-A-L-E-N-D-A-R-S!



"My new goal was not just to survive, but to come out of this place a better man than the one that entered into this place."

*–Nicholas Crayton
Former TWO ROADS Editor-In-Chief*

“Truth” and “Sentencing”

Yusef Kareem Brown

Pinckneyville

The truth is, I was weak and couldn't get up. I was sentenced to death by the devil. “Truth and Sentencing” they called. I've faced so many battles over the years in this place they call prison. That devil had my soul. It has been said that we are all slaves and to something. Like material things, alcohol, drugs, women and a life of crime. I was a lost soul before prison and that's my truth.

I was sentenced by the devil to do a crime back in Chicago. I was running a rat race I couldn't win, but I ran it anyway. That devil promised me that I'll win and take over. That was a BIG lie. That devil opened a clear path to the streets called “Truth” and “Sentencing”.

I was running dead already. My spirit was so low and I couldn't slow down or go a different direction. At this point in my life, the devil was declaring his boundary in my young life. I started prison at 22. I am now 39.

I sit here writing about “Truth and Sentencing” of myself. The lies felt all too real.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

I was sentenced to a life of crime, prostitution and hate. I was weak.

I was a slave to the devil and his trickery. I had become affected by adversity by a system that didn't care for me and my own foundation Chained and bound by my ankles, but yet I still have hope. See the idea of being a slave for life by personal choices?

I was letting my family down. It is natural to hope that the people we have hurt will think better of us once we have sought to make amends. We may fear that there are some who will never upgrade their opinions about you, no matter what we do.

That's "truth" and "Sentencing" for you. I am no longer angered by the system. I put myself here by listening to the devil, over and over again.

P.S. Please be strong and take heart. Be positive and God Bless.

Why Should I Be Paroled

Abdul Riley

Vienna

Why should I be given parole?

Well, first off, you shouldn't give me anything, but if I deserve it, you should award it. I've been incarcerated for over 16 years. On all court documents, I have to give the state eight more years of my life because my out date is October 4, 2023. Please understand, I know it could've been way worse than what it currently is, but even this out day was, and still is, a date that's even way too far for me to see. I believe Illinois should adapt to new criminal justice reform and prison reform bills where we're allowed to earn early discretionary release via the parole board.

The parole board was taken away in 1978, which is when I genuinely believe this system went away from corrections and toward punishment. This change has had an historical significance because it's led to incarcerated individuals spending more time in prison, and more money spent by taxpayers to house people who've faded out of crime into adulthood. The board wouldn't act as a get out of jail free card. Instead, it'll be used as a tool to gauge whether individuals are ready to reenter society as productive citizens. I was charged as a co-defendant for the murder and later found guilty and given 25 years to serve in the Department of Corrections.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

When sentenced, I told the Judge that I could be rehabilitated because I wasn't a bad guy in the first place. I don't know where those words came from, but all I know is those are the words my heart told my mouth to say at that moment. Sometimes I wonder how no one understands the victimizer was the victim first. It seems this world only wants to hear you admit to what you did wrong. No one wants to listen to your cries. They only want to see you suffer because they have no answers for all the wrongs done to you. They may even start feeling sorry for you if you were allowed to tell your story, but the truth is we're products of our environment. So, I always pose this one question to all people, is there an excuse for ignorance? Some say yes, and others say no, but most agree that there is an excuse for ignorance.

My stance on this issue is simple. Most of us from inner cities came from dysfunctional, broken, one-parent households. And outside our homes, most of us didn't do well in school. Therefore, we dropped out and became a part of something we felt at the time was bigger than life. So, we became what was in front of us because those were the only images we saw. However, I agree there are no excuses once you're shown a better way and still choose ignorance; there are no excuses!!! But, when dealing with the inner city, there's a lot of hard wired negative thinking. So, we need to focus on it.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

Most kids act off impulse from the day of their birth up until 21 years of age. Some may even say 25 years of age, and that very same impulse is coerced by the things that shaped them up until that point. I don't want to go too far back in history in fear that I might lose you, so I'll stay on track. The courts and the lawmakers treat the prison population as if we're rejects from a factory where they're only building perfect human beings in. I am not my crime, I am not a defect, and I can say that for almost all of the guys around me. If you look at the percentage of incarcerated people, you'll see most of us are being sentenced for something we did as youthful offenders.

Prison has built its' reputation off corrections, but that statement is no longer true with the truth-in-sentence bill in play. I understand IDOC and state law are two different things, but they work as one. State law hands down the time and IDOC upholds it. The idea of incarceration started from the thought to rehab people, not punish them. A unified code unites state law and IDOC to correct behavior, not strip someone of their life. The mode should never be an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth.

The gladiator days are far over with. You're dealing with humans, not barbarians. When dealing with the human element of all things, you have so much room for things to go wrong. So, for that fact upon others, we have to give people space to be corrected before making judgments that they're unfit for society..

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

I don't know what would be a good sentence for murder, or any other crime for that matter, but something tells me you don't know either

So, we must give people room to grow into men and women we would've become if society didn't get a hold of us first.

Do I agree there are consequences for our actions? Yes, but do you agree people can get better if we focus on the correction and not the punishment? Every day of my incarceration, I've purposely taken steps to facilitate growth within myself, and it all started with acceptance and forgiveness. I accept I made a mistake and forgave myself enough to the point where I started contributing to the healing process. Most men and women who've been locked up for as long as I have or longer, understand the concept of life now, and it all starts with changing your way of thinking.

I've stripped myself of most things I've learned while being consumed with the stench of society. I've clothed myself with all things that'll match perfectly in the community when pertaining to someone trying to reach their full potential in life, but more so as a person, and I have the track record to prove it. Over these past years, I've been displaying much-improved decision-making and empathy, and as I said before, our court system and IDOC's most significant pillar is corrections.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

I must say I've been corrected rather directly or indirectly. I offer my disciplinary record, work history, and my participation in behavioral self-modification classes as proof.

I represent all the people who got it wrong the first time around, but at the same time, I also represent the change someone can make if they truly wish to grow even while in the midst of chaos. As a teenager I often found myself operating off pride and impulse, which left so many stains on my soul. I've been working vigorously as an adult to clean it up. It's been a process, but I like who I've become. I trust who I've become.

I deserve early discretionary release because if I'm put as the head of a household, I could help build a great family of my own. I can help build a family who can contribute to everything good with this world. I deserve to see the parole board in hopes of an early release because I've worked for it.

I've shown that even while the crime I was convicted of was a serious one, it was a one-off. Unfortunately, someone lost their life, but I've done a lot to correct that behavior. No one deserves to lose their life in the manner of which Robert lost his. I had a tremendous amount of love and loyalty as a youth, but I genuinely believe I gave it away blindly. I'm no longer that kid I used to be. I'm a grown man now.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

I was always told you only become a man once you know and accept who you are; that way, you can start making decisions for the person you know you are instead of the person you think you are. My mind and body work as one now. My focus and discipline are on the same page now. Our minds are extraordinary, and we can do just about anything.

Still if we can make our bodies follow our minds, our most extraordinary thoughts can manifest. I deserve early discretionary release because I'm not a menace to society. Instead, I'll be an asset.

The media only portrays men and women who've been released and continued in their criminal behavior. Still, I challenge you to look at the men and women who've contributed great success to this world after their release. That's what I'm determined to do to be a success story. I understand that coming from the inner city of Chicago, we've all accumulated trauma which might've had a cumulative effect on us, but instead of running from that trauma and allowing it to become a distraction, we must attack it head-on.

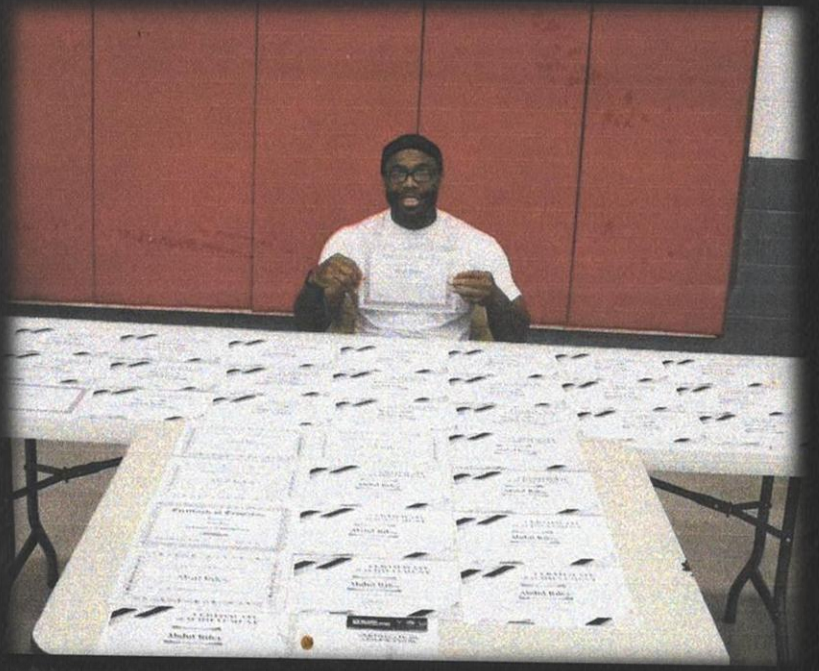
We must coexist with it and adapt to it; using it as motivation. Trauma can also be your strength if you find ways to use it correctly, and that's what I've done. I've taken my trauma and the trauma I might've caused other people and turned it into my passion, which led me to helping others.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

I'm currently taking part in a building block program offered at Vandalia Correction Center. This program is to create an environment that fosters positive change through a series of mentor-driven programs founded on the core principles of respect, responsibility, ownership, community and empathy—core values we all need to get the best out of ourselves. In that same program, they voted me to be a mentor, which I've taken very seriously.

I also understand as a kid, I was mature in some areas. However, in other areas, I was very immature, and most of the time, as a kid, I found myself acting off impulse instead of sitting down, collecting all of the information, and weighing out my pros and cons. As an adult, I can't remember how many times as a kid I honestly thought about how my actions could or would affect someone else. I understand now!

I stand before you once a broken kid who's now a healed grown man and I pray with all of me that you can see that too. Much love and Respect.



“My Life is at Stake”

VanDaire Knox

Illinois River

The impact of the Truth-In-Sentencing law on my life can never be repaired. First, I must say it was my actions that placed me here in prison for 23 years and counting. I came to prison a 24-years old angry boy, pretending to be a man! Since my incarceration, there are things that have happened that have put me on my knees.

When the Judge sentence me to 45 years at 100%, it was basically my death sentence because, as a black man, we die at a higher rate from prostate cancer, colon cancer, diabetes, so our life expectancy is less than others.

Over the years I’ve almost given up hope, but I could not leave my daughters in this world without giving my babies and grandkids a chance to get to know me, a true man, before the Lord calls me home. Through this storm, I did find the love of my life, who is my wife now!!

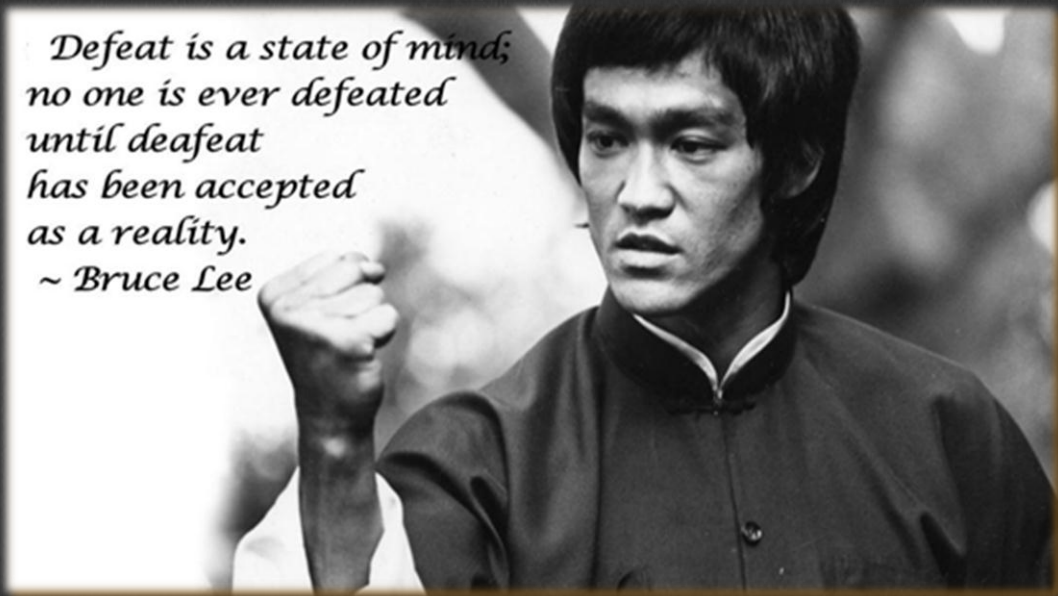
My mother has been battling cancer and heart failure, which she has a defibrillator. I am afraid of losing her while I am still incarcerated. When I do get a chance to see my mother face-to-face,

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

she cries the entire visit, making me realize just how much she misses me and how I have let her down. My sister has a daughter, who I have never met, as the same with my brothers' sons.

In conclusion, the Lord will give me a chance to save someone's young son or daughter, who was just like me, doing the devils' work.

*Defeat is a state of mind;
no one is ever defeated
until defeat
has been accepted
as a reality.
~ Bruce Lee*



Truth In Sentencing

DON'T WORK

Eric Smeader

Menard

My name is Eric Smeader. I was 19 years old when I committed a murder. I plead guilty and was sentenced to 45 years in prison at 100%. I've done 19 years and have 26 years left. I'm currently in the 2nd stage of my post-conviction, fighting my de facto life sentence.

As a youthful offender under the Truth-In-Sentencing law, let me tell you, **IT DON'T WORK!** It doesn't deter violence. It doesn't consider that the "characters and habits" of youth are "*presumably, to a large extent, as unformed and unsettled*" (People ex. Rel. Bradley v. Illinois State Reformatory, 148 Ill. 413, 423 (1894)).

It systematically oppresses individuals by creating excessive sentences, denying our individual rehabilitation and eliminating our opportunity to achieve parole. Even if legislators allowed us to see the Parole Board, the Truth-In-Sentencing law wouldn't allow them to grant us parole. The 20 Ill. Adm Code 1610.50(a) states:

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

*“The Board grants parole as an exercise of grace and executive discretion as limited or defined by the Illinois General Assembly in duly adopted legislation. The Board **shall not** parole a person eligible for parole, if it determines that... (2) His release at the time would **depreciate** the seriousness of his offense or promote disrespect for the law.”*

This means that the Truth-In-Sentencing law does not give the Board discretion to exercise grace **towards you**. Only the legislators can give meaningful opportunity to be restored to useful citizenship. In conclusion, if I could propose an idea to the legislation, it would be to amend or annul the Truth-In-Sentencing for youthful offenders under the age of 21 years old (at the time of the offense), retroactively, that we may have the opportunity to achieve parole.

Until then, I stand in hope that one day I'll be given the chance to demonstrate the self-motivated rehabilitation and achieve useful citizenship.



The Ripple Effects and Cruelty of Truth in Sentencing

*(and the Human Toll and Impact on Society and the
Victimization It has Thus Far Caused the Innocent)*

Arturo Viegra

East Moline

Three lost lives and twelve children without their parents to date.

On November 2003, I was found guilty of First Degree Attempted Murder, and sentenced to 30 years at 85%--to serve 25 ½—of which I have served almost 21 years.

My crime of passion caused great loss and pain to my children. My action of brokenness produced my direct victim, and my indirect victims: my children.

Had truth in sentencing not been passed, I would have had the opportunity to have served only 50% of my 30-year sentence, placing me with my family, and changing the course of being victimized by this cruel law which fails completely to reduce crime.

In my life, this law has caused my sons to raise themselves on the streets of Chicago, joining gangs and a life of crime.

Truth in sentencing is the device of political careers, which adds devastation and crime to a society even more unsafe and broken.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

In 2020, my son Luis was charged with kidnapping. On October 23, 2019, my son George (rest in peace) was fond hung in a federal jail.

On December 17, 2020, my son George Hector was involved in a murder-suicide and a total of seven children were left parentless.

May my son's victim, Maria, rest in peace?

On Feb 28, 2023, my son faces murder charges of Karena Silva (may she rest in peace). Together, they leave five children fatherless and motherless.

Society must recognize that truth-in-sentencing does not reduce crime but promotes it. It victimizes. Its ripple effects are devastating.

It is my strong conviction that if truth-in-sentencing would have not existed, Maria, Karena, and George Hector would still be alive, and their twelve children combined would have had their parents. Now it is no longer four children in the streets of Chicago but twelve. The ripple effects have tripled.

My daughters have not had it easy either. They have been victimized in ways that, to protect their privacy, I dare not share.

Truth-in-sentencing must be re-evaluated and made a thing of the past. Politicians should not secure their political careers with laws that produce further victims. I live with tremendous guilt, and this guilt motivates me to demonstrate the effects of this cruel law.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Blessed With a Natural Life Sentence

Anthony Spencer, Sr.
Galesburg

How ridiculous this must sound. But it's true. I was spared the death penalty, blessed with a natural life sentence plus 50 years. . . . Let me share with you how it came to be, the before, what occurred during, and the now.

Man, I was a scummy crook with a closet dope habit that everybody knew about; dressed up pain pretending to be someone I wasn't. One day a gun was put in my hand, endless dope up my nose, the promise of the biggest score I ever hit in my life. The one that could fix everything . . . or so I thought. A man lost his life; it almost got me executed and cost me my soul. But for the mercy of GOD, and the judge's reconsideration, I was spared.

Prison for the first time. I wouldn't slime myself out of this one. "Why did I have to get all this time?" That was what I was thinking while waiting to be processed at my new home. The infamous "VILLE", Stateville Maximum Penitentiary.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

HCU (health care unit) in the bullpen is where my life-changing experience occurred, from a dirty old sick guy in a yellow jumpsuit cuffed in a wheelchair going out on a medical writ. “He look like death!” rumor said. “He had that package!”

This was when much fear and ignorance surrounded the AIDS virus. GOD used that guy to change my life.

Back in the county jail in segregation I was at one of my lowest moments, after being beat down by my jailer while they defused a rumble on my deck. Realizing I had lost everything being there. I received a beautiful card from my baby’s mother. It read, “I’m here, you’re there, I need a man, baby needs a daddy. . . . I’ll tell the child you died in a car accident Bye Kitten.”

Man, I couldn’t even fake, I was crushed. The devil was having his way. I almost committed the unimaginable. I cried out for Jesus, and HE answered. I got saved that night. I slept after that spiritual experience for the first time in almost three years. I woke up on fire for GOD, telling everyone: “GET YOU SOME OF THIS!”—although I really didn’t know what “THIS!” was at that time. But I knew it felt better than dope! My situation didn’t change—but my heart did. Now, reflecting back, I realize I developed an “ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE.” My perspective changed, then my life followed.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

Back to where GOD gave my life purpose: At that HCU, GOD moved my heart to help that guy. HE just didn't tell me how.

After seeing that guy, I had to do something. I couldn't sleep—it kept bothering me. So I wrote a letter from my heart, saying how I wanted to help that guy and others like him. I sent out copies to everyone in authority. Then I forgot about it. A couple months later, three officers came to my cage, yelling, “Bust down this cell!” Told me, “Get dressed, let's go!”

They marched me to the HCU conference room, where a long table was with all three wardens, two medical directors, legal staff, and the DON (Director of Nursing) who conducted the interrogation. They all looked very serious. I felt nervous.

She began by saying they read my letter and decided to interview me. “WHAT'S YOUR GAME!?! Don't no one volunteer to do this!” I explained what happened, how I was moved to do something, didn't know what to do, and so I wrote everyone with my request to help. Her next barrage of questions began with, “Do you have any experience?” I replied, “NO.” “Do you have any training?” “NO.”

“Do you have any advanced education? Do you have any family members at home affected with illness requiring care?” “NO.” “Then how do you expect to help anyone?” I replied, “Anyway I can.” I was asked to leave the room.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

Back in the hallway I waited with the officers.

I was called back into the room. The DON said, “We will give you a chance, but we will be watching you!” That was over twenty years ago, I’m still assisting geriatrics, the sick and handicapped. That opportunity gave my life meaning and purpose, and kept me in check, because others depended on me, and I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize my being able to help.

I was a functioning illiterate who could barely read. But since I’ve been blessed to achieve a GED and college education; trained and constantly re-certified by Illinois Department of Public Health and Illinois Department of Correction’s Medical staff; endorsed as a certificated nurses’ aide, hospice aide, and living aide; allowed to become an HIV/AIDS Peer educator; advanced to counselor; trained in Bio-hazard/Chemical cleaning and removal; all with over twenty years’ work experience.

I was also privileged to accomplish a plethora of diplomas from other prestigious educational institutions like Chicago Theological Seminary and DePaul University. In my 27 years of incarceration, on my disciplinary record I only have four infractions: three for contraband, like having someone else’s tape or radio; and one unauthorized movement, because the wrong movement officer took me to my assignment.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

In all that time, not one fight, only by the protection of GOD. But the true blessing of this natural life sentence was the virtues that were brought out of me, blessings I never knew I had, like *HUMILITY, PATIENCE, COMPASSION, EMPATHY and DEDICATION*. The gift of the good medicine of laughter and joy to give the sick, to care for the forgotten with the ability to preserve their dignity, to bring comfort to afraid dying brothers, to assure them they are not alone.



TWO ROADS

www.idoc.illinois.gov/news/tworoadse-zine.html

Speaking the Truth in Love

Kareem J. Cobbins

Illinois River

The “Truth” pertaining to Sentencing, as of lately...what a relief it is to know that the Truth-In-Sentencing law and its’ revisions will provide deliverance for those eligible, and I’m hopeful that the Truth-In-Sentencing law will be abolished soon. Reverting back to day-for-day instead.

The mental anguish that the Truth-In-Sentencing law has/is causing on many incarcerated men such as myself and women within the Illinois Department of Corrections and our stakeholders, the victims (and their families), our family members and communities of care has caused the awakened transparency of this unjust, unconstitutional law to be exposed by the masses (especially the taxpayers of Illinois), transmitting to a positive change.

This awareness/productive advocacy contributions by those in the inside and outside; Together with the state legislators, acting on the best interest of restorative justice, has brought about structured unity and a healing process that our communities need in the face of our “at times” adverse and traumatic experiences.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

Speaking our “Truth-In-Sentencing” regarding a better democracy and acting out in love, despite hateful disruptive obstacles has brought us to redemption.

Truthfully, we all need each other moving forward for the sake of fairness and justice for “All”. We must “All” continue to advocate for more equitable jail, prison and community practices/policies prepping “All” for a fair chance at relief/parole, re-entry opportunities as returning citizens.

It always seems impossible until it's done.
-Nelson Mandela



Time for a Change

Ray Guereca

Galesburg

This is not a story but a fact on how truth in sentencing affects our communities; black, brown, yellow and poor whites folk alike.

Violence has plagued our communities, for most of our communities, it wasn't always like that. "Our" politicians are aware of this problem and use it to their advantage by manipulating us to become elected.

Their speech usually calls for harsher sentences, more power to policing, laws that target not their communities, but our communities; so, in return, we have police officers shooting people, people shooting officers and over-populated prisons. The answer?

Our state chooses to close our schools, yet build prisons. They are (correctional and police officers) are over-paid, yet no one complains when those funds could be allocated for the teachers to get what they rightfully deserve. This is the problem; where there is not enough schooling and programs that help better our communities. Instead WE have "Truth-In-Sentencing" laws that help cripple our communities by imprisoning our fathers, mothers,

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and cousins for a very long time, with no chance of true rehabilitation through schooling and/or programs. See the pattern?

We continue to walk down this path over and over again with no change, which is the true definition of insanity. Instead of voting for a politician who literally calls to imprison our communities, maybe we should vote for a political figure that is willing to help work with and build our communities. Maybe, it's time for a change.



"Our minds are extraordinary, and we can do just about anything. Still if we can make our bodies follow our minds, our most extraordinary thoughts can manifest. "

Abdul R. Riley
Page 16

A Message From...

Robert Belz

Pinckneyville

Sixteen years ago I made the terrible decision to take a life, and ever since then I've felt a range of emotions including anger, remorse, sadness, and shame. But, I recognize the struggle I've been going through is immaterial when compared to the struggle of the loved ones of my victim and those of my own family.

At the time of my arrest—even though I took responsibility for my actions—I didn't know what remorse was. I couldn't and still can't comprehend what could've made me do what I had done. Through the years all of that has changed. I feel as though I've defied the odds and expectations of my surrounding. I've pursued my own rehabilitation as doggedly as I'm allowed, and have taken advantage of every opportunity given to me. I'm not perfect; there have been missteps and regression at times. I've had setbacks on this journey and have even given in to the despair of the totality of the situation that I have myself and my family in.

Truth-In-Sentencing (T-I-S) is an albatross around the neck of everybody (in prison or not)! T-I-S eliminates the idea that anybody can change because the sentence you received at the beginning of

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

this journey stays the same 5, 10, 15 years down the road no matter how you change. The law is punishment for punishment's sake. Take a moment and think on that. . . . The idea that it doesn't matter what you do, how much you change, or the amends you make because at the end of the day your outlook doesn't change.

Can you imagine the despair that causes not only for us but for our families and the people who care for and support us on our journey? Imagine the joy some of those people might feel when they see the change take place in us only to come to the realization that a few of them may not live to see such new promise and potential be put to use in the beginning of a new life.

I don't ask you to imagine such things to gain sympathy or pity, but to illustrate my point. I believe it's only a very few who could overcome such hopelessness in pursuit of a better self. If our goal is true rehabilitation and a return to society then it would behoove you to restore our hope. And maybe if we work hard to change our lives then you'll allow us to return home just a little earlier. Release us with the memory of the mercy shown to us so we might one day live up to our potential and pay it forward.



Registry Americana

Timothy Peterson
Shawnee

In America, the registry came first for the sex offender.

I didn't speak up because I wasn't a sex offender...

When the registry came for the violent against youth, I remained silent;
as I was not a violent against youth...

When the registry came for the murderers, I didn't speak out; I was not
a murderer...

When the registry came for the drug dealers, and I didn't speak up
because I wasn't a drug dealer...

The registry came for felons, and I remained silent because I wasn't a
felon...

When the registry came for me,

There was no one left to speak out!

(Adapted from a poem by Martin Niemoller)

Repeal Truth In Sntencing

Nicholas Chittick
Robinson

My name is Nicholas Chittick and I've been in prison for nearly twenty-five years. I caught my case in late 1998, at the beginning of Truth-In-Sentencing (T-I-S), and was sentenced to 28 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) at 100%, NOT 50%. T-I-S, in my opinion, is one of the clearest examples of unequal application of the law and unconstitutionality in existence, despite the Olympic-level legal gymnastics Illinois courts have employed to rationalize this unjust law.

Since 1999, I've gone from being an angry young man behind the wall who used to regularly visit seg to becoming a state-certified Peer Educator, a Peer Support Mentor and a certified Paralegal with advanced credentials in civil litigation. As an Army veteran, I was a staff writer for *Behind the Lines*, the quarterly newsletter published by the Incarcerated Veterans Rehabilitation Program at Graham C.C. I've become a published author, having published commentary in *Statesville Speaks*, fiction and nonfiction in online literary magazines like *Wild Violets* and more, and three books, my lastest a memoir *A Prisoner's Fight* in 2021.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

I'm a life-long musician, a former child prodigy and present-day composer, virtuoso guitarist and music educator. I wrote a textbook in 2015 entitled *Basic Music Theory*, while at Danville C.C., where I then developed a curriculum and submitted a syllabus for a music theory course that I taught at both Danville C.C. and Jacksonville C.C.

Almost all of the educational classes I completed throughout my incarceration were correspondence courses I enrolled in at my own expense. This is because it's very difficult for those under T-I-S to enroll in educational programs because we can't earn sentence credits. More on the blatant discrimination T-I-S prisoners endure in a sec, but the state sponsored programs I participated in over the years—few though they may be—weren't so I'd return home earlier. I can't. I participated in them in the genuine interest of self-betterment.

None of my institutional accomplishments, however, mean anything to the state of Illinois or the IDOC. I've been in A Grade since 2008. It doesn't matter. The majority of those sentenced to serve 100% of their sentences are, like me, first time offenders. It's irrelevant. Those under T-I-S are de facto unworthy of rehabilitation and irredeemable. I could save Governor Pritzker's life and it wouldn't earn me one single minute of sentence credit. Which is why if I'm ever in a position to save the governor's life, I probably won't.

That was a joke.

Were I ever truly in a position to save the governor's life, I probably would. Maybe. But, as with the other aspects of positivity I've experienced and perpetuated during my incarceration, it wouldn't be in expectation of time off my sentence. It'd be because it was the right thing to do.

Now let's circle back to how T-I-S is blatantly discriminatory. In the IDOC, educational enrollments and rehabilitative programming (and now, since criminal justice reform enacted in 2020, job assignments) are awarded based on two main criteria; the nearness of one's outdate and whether that person can earn sentence credits. I've heard the question posed by teachers and counselors repeatedly over the years, "You can't earn good time."

"Why on earth would you want to take this class?" T-I-S prisoners are allowed to sign up for classes, but we can't earn sentence credits. Therefore, our outdates are virtually always further away than our day-for-day fellow prisoners, and as a result, our names remain perpetually at the bottom of the waitlists. Those who can earn sentence credits are unfailingly given preference time and again.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

I'm pretty sure an IDOC spokesperson would chime in at this point if they were given the opportunity and claim that, "The Illinois Department of Corrections provides educational and rehabilitative programs to all of its individuals in custody."

But, I'm here to tell you, as my fellow T-I-S prisoners can certainly verify, in the real world this is simply not the case. Some of us may receive such opportunities on occasion, as I myself have, but these are the rare exceptions to the rule. T-I-S in producing thousands of parolees who'll be released back into society after decades of incarceration spent being denied the educational and rehabilitative programs available for day-for-day prisoners.

It's especially frustrating to us when we see day-for-dayers coming through on their fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, etc., incarceration to be granted education, rehabilitative and employment opportunities over us on each of their repeated incarcerations while T-I-S prisoners are continually denied. Make no mistake, T-I-S resides as a neighbor to such profound wrongs as Discrimination and Segregation within the realm of social injustice. It's that serious. It's that evil. It's an evil law.

And the grievances I've thus expressed about T-I-S don't even take into account the personal toll this law has taken upon the women and men subjected to it. By a stroke of the pen, it added

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

years, even decades, of additional time onto a person's sentence. It added fourteen extra years onto mine. Within the additional fourteen years I was forced to serve under the unyielding grip of Truth-In-Sentencing, many of my friends and relatives have passed away: my mother in 2020 and my father in 2022.

Under day-for-day, I would've been there. My children became adults and grandchildren were born who don't know me. All of my fellow T-I-S people know the burden of having our time behind bars doubled. It's a hard hit to take. Whether you think we deserve it or not, it's a hard hit to take. That's a plain fact.

Adding even more salt to the wound is the fact that not only do 100%ers need to serve their court imposed sentences in their entirety, we must also serve three additional years beyond what we were sentenced to for so-called Mandatory Supervised Release (MSR). We are sentenced to this additional three years without due process by the IDOC. I've challenged this automatic sentence which extends our time three years beyond our judicially imposed sentences as an unlawful delegation of judicial authority, to no avail.

But, perhaps the most hypocritical aspect of T-I-S is that it's NOT true. I was sentenced to 28 years in prison by a lawful Illinois Court, but must serve 31 years.

TRUTH IN SENTENCING

While I know MSR is envisioned to be a form of parole to be served outside of prisons, everyone in the IDOC knows there are many who serve their entire MSR terms inside prison without ever being released, and even more who are briefly released, then returned to prison on a “violation” to serve the remainder of their “supervised release” behind bars.

All of this is to say nothing of the hundreds of millions of dollars T-I-S is costing Illinois taxpayers. Those familiar with the history of this law know shortsighted Illinois legislators accepted modest funding from the federal government in exchange for passing T-I-S legislation. They accepted a few nickels back in the late 90’s and are now paying back dollars for it.

Based on common sense, what’s good for the state and what’s good in the interest of Restorative Justice, the only real solution is to **Repeal Truth-in-sentencing Immediately.**

TWO ROADS is now ONLINE

We strongly encourage that your family and friends share the link below of this issue (and other informative issues) with lawmakers, advocacy groups and other power-wielding stakeholders in four easy steps:

- 1) Go to "IDOC HOME PAGE" (idoc.illinois.gov)
- 2) Click "ABOUT"
- 3) Click "NEWS"
- 4) Select "TWO ROADS E-ZINE"

Not only will you see our current issues, but this will allow you to see past issues and submissions from the many souls who have spoken.

Although your insightful analysis, strong feelings and creative policy suggestions are real and deserve to be considered, this humble opportunity is limited to just relating your story to other human beings, so that they may make courageous decisions with our humanity in mind.

TWO ROADS

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

TWO ROADS is accepting submissions for this current issue. We believe that everyone has goals to achieve and we would like you to share your experiences. From losing weight to motivation and career changes. From learning a trade or furthering your education, this is an opportunity for you express yourself and inspire others.

TWO ROADS would also like for the those who close to release to express their transformation and their future objectives outside of their incarceration. Families and former individuals are strongly encouraged to submit their experiences.

Outsiders and Individuals-In-Custody
(With Staff Support)

Please send your submission and scanned photo to penny.rowan@illinois.gov
"ATTN: TWO ROADS Transformations"

Mail submission, photo to:

Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center
Attn: TWO ROADS EDITOR
2021 Kentville Road
Kewanee IL 61443

Deadline is July 31st

CRIME

DRUGS

PILLS



Let's End This!

In accordance with National Recovery Month in September, TWO ROADS presents you with an outlook of our community, as well as the communities on the outside. Submissions are now being accepted for **ADDICTION & RECOVERY** issue. You may talk about the addiction that you are trying to defeat or you can talk about the recovery you have had from an addiction. The goal is to support one another and encourage those who are in need.

Deadline is Thursday, August 31st

ALCOHOL SEX GAMBLING

TWO ROADS

IDOC's Social Justice Program

Volume 19, Part 2

Founders

Jim Estes

Ricky Hamilton

Jennifer Parrack

Publisher

Jim Estes

Editor-In-Chief

Kenji Haley

Interim Faculty Advisor

Penny Rowan

Content Editor

T. Wilson

Associate Editors

Keith "Aquil" Talley

Marcus Harris

Tyrone Delaney

Jesse Myers

Ronnie Carrasquillo

House Poets

John Williams

Carlos D. McDougal

Two Roads Advisors

Leondus Carter

Nicholas Crayton

THE TRUTH IN SENTENCING ISSUE

TWO ROADS

Presents

PIEDR



PRESSURE

Volume Twenty Two

COMING SOON