

Center For Constitutional Rights

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/blog/2021/01/28/death-incarceration-sentences-impact-families-and-communities-outside>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The CCR blog

Speakers discuss Death by Incarceration at "[Brick by Brick: A community forum on ending Death By Incarceration in Pennsylvania](#)"

On January 26, [Abolitionist Law Center](#), [Amistad Law Project](#), and the Center for Constitutional Rights hosted [Brick by Brick: A community forum on ending Death By Incarceration in Pennsylvania](#), which discussed the ongoing legal and political fight to abolish Death By Incarceration (otherwise known as Life Without Parole) sentences in Pennsylvania. Christina Reyes, a speaker at the event and loved one of Matthew Garcia, who is serving a Death By Incarceration sentence in a Pennsylvania prison, shared her personal experience of having a loved one inside. Below is a statement she prepared for the event, followed by a poem written by Matthew.

The work to challenge DBI sentences continues - [find out more on our case page](#).

Good evening everyone, First I wanted to say thank you for inviting me to be a part of this speaking engagement to discuss the importance of Death by Incarceration, and why individuals serving life sentences deserve a second opportunity. As a family member of a loved one serving a DBI sentence, I realized that going through this experience, and having a loved one incarcerated but who has been sentenced to Death by Incarceration hurts my soul. Think of the word death and it isn't a pleasant word knowing the definition.

Each day that I have the blessing to speak with my loved one it affects me differently. Matthew Garcia, who isn't just two letters and four numbers has been in prison since he was 18 years old for Second Degree Accomplice liability. It's been 23 years of his life taken away to this system we call the Correctional Institution. My loved one has learned everything on his own because he has taken the initiative to be productive so he can progress despite his current circumstances. Prison doesn't provide stability when lifers are warehoused, and not offered the same opportunities or educational program as those who continue to be reentry offenders. It can cause PTSD and heighten other mental health behaviors in some of our loved ones face due to the trauma of what is seen daily in these hostile environments.

Where guards are constantly screaming in the background of a phone call giving demands. Where lights are kept on during different hours of the day causing many men and women not to sleep well as they try to drown out the noise. While their families are suffering from emotional stress because who wants to know that their loved ones are suffering, and you're doing anything possible to help them when things are beyond your control. It bothers me when concerns from family members aren't taken seriously instead they are dismissed as if our loved ones aren't important enough to be loved and cared about. It's hard to know that they have stolen the identity of our loved one who can't even express themselves in the fashion that you and I can.

To know how bright and intelligent they are but knowing they can't articulate themselves, and be heard because then the staff at the prison facilities will say "They're too smart or why are they using such big words," like why can't our loved ones be more than just a stereotype? When can't they have the same dreams and aspirations just like us. We can all agree that none of us are the same people we were 23 years ago, so wouldn't that reflect that our loved ones have changed too, and should be given a chance at reprieve. As a family member it hurts knowing that your loved one is being patronized or spoken to in a condensing tone constantly just because staff at these prison facilities feel they have the authority which most times isn't helpful but demeaning.

Why aren't our loved ones entitled to respect or having someone look them in the eyes and give them their undivided attention but yet everyone incarcerated is looked at the same way. Why are we constantly given reminders of our loved ones being in prison, whether it's during the visit which makes you feel uneasy or as if giving love and affection is wrong. It bothers me also knowing that prior to you walking in that visiting room your loved one was told to strip naked and humiliated but still walks out to greet you with a smile as if nothing happened.

Just because spending time with family becomes the highlight of their life. Phone calls being interrupted by the announcement that this call is from Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution this call is subject to recording and monitoring. When I already know my loved one is incarcerated and we both feel oppressed. When our family doesn't feel complete because everything is a restriction on both sides of when, and what we are able to do. When we are trying to connect & build or communicate our privacy or private moments are stolen. Knowing the lack of stability that your loved one has to go through from their cell being ransacked with no regards to their personal property or being moved around, only to a different prison facility that continues to take away from their culture.

I think it's important for people to be aware that these harsh sentences aren't helping our communities. If anything it's adding to the cause and effect as to why so many families are broken and why this cycle still continues. Who does it benefit from taking a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a son or a daughter away from their family and saying it's okay to sentence them to death by incarceration? Our communities are breaking down, our families are trying to stay together and everyone involved is hurting. I miss my loved one everyday and during Covid-19 even more because they're locked in a cell 23 hours a day.

I am concerned for his health. I'm disappointed with how the DOC is handling the high numbers of deaths of those incarcerated because they're just an inmate, a number, and not looked at as an equal.

We need to understand these individuals made a mistake, but who is anyone to say they should die in prison without a second chance at redemption. Our loved ones incarcerated are capable, intelligent and have morals. They can flourish just like the rest of us because we know better than anyone by being their families. They have changed in so many positive ways. We don't just want them home. We need them home. They deserve to be home!

* * *

They Call Me Lifer, by Matthew Garcia

They call me lifer but thats not my name.

I am human, I fallible, I am change.

I am more than two letters and four numbers.

I have a heart beat, I have empathy.

I am remorseful for any atrocity I have committed.

Years of reflection, introspection have told me I had a good soul that just needed some time to grow.

Though they still call me lifer but thats not my name.

I am humane, I am fallible, I am change.

I am more than two letters and four numbers.

Growing conveyed I see and be of help.

I owe diligence to my service and Id rather be effective then heard or seen.

Touching the numb inspiring the maybe jaded.

Yet they call me lifer but thats not my name.

I am human, I am fallible, I am change.

I am more than two letters and four numbers.

I try to assist with the healing and not just be a band aid on a wide open wound.

I am experience, I am medicine, I was the worst case scenario now I am redemption.

Yeah they call me lifer but thats not my name.

I am human, I am fallible I am change.

I am more than two letters and four numbers.

They call me lifer but thats not my name!

[View the discussion thread.](#)

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