

February 18, 2020

Dr. Susan Lawrence asked me to write this letter on behalf of the LWOP inmates who participate in the Insight Prison Project's Victim Offender Education program in the Southern California prisons. This program was started in 1997 in San Quentin. It was designed by licensed mental health therapists in collaboration with survivors of violent crimes and people incarcerated for previously violent behavior.

Over the last six years I have worked with hundreds of men in blue in three prisons facilitating this program. The purpose of the program is to help inmates fully understand and take responsibility for the impact of their crimes on their victims, families, communities, and themselves and to make the necessary changes to live a life free from crime. The curriculum and group work is grounded in restorative justice principles and practices and provides opportunities and tools to develop insight into the causative factors that brought one to commit their crime, to develop empathy and to take responsibility for the choices made.

One of the factors I am fully aware of, having heard hundreds of crime impact statements, is in most cases the crimes committed by LWOPs were NOT more heinous than the crimes of men with 25-35-years-to-life sentences. I believe, in the pursuit of a fair and equitable criminal justice system, all inmates should have an opportunity to present in front of a parole board and be questioned about their rehabilitative progress. We currently have 7 men in the VOEG program who, during the last seven months, have either already paroled, have been found appropriate for parole and or are waiting for release dates. This is a tribute to the quality of the commitment of these men to their own discovery process of learning why they committed the crimes that resulted in their incarceration. The program is designed to explore childhood trauma, poverty, violence, oppression, and neglect which the men discover are the causative factors that led them to make the choices that eventually led to their crimes.

Yesterday I facilitated a group of men who are in their second year of VOEG. As a group check-in we were discussing the following quote, "the most profound blessings we will ever know are those that meet us in the place of our deepest loss and inspire us to choose to live again." Two men who are LWOPs shared one of the times when they seriously considered suicide as the preferred option to living a life without hope. One of them had just lost his LWOP cellmate to suicide. He was practicing how to do the same with his bed sheet. The other man who was in the SHU (segregated housing unit) and was ready to give up found suicide the best option to end his pain and suffering. What I have come to understand from this segment of the incarcerated population is that for many, when there is no longer hope of living outside the prison walls, and no alternative can be found, thoughts of suicide begin to form. The very thought of committing suicide can fuel the mind with the belief that death can soon end the pain. This belief can be so soothing that suicide becomes the only solution.

I think it is critical that we understand to remove hope from a human being leaves them no recourse other than to seek spiritual comfort and consolation to cope with the despair. Some find this path, and many don't.

Thank you for listening to my testimony and I hope in some way these words deepen your own understanding of the role of hope in all our lives.

Respectfully,

Andrea Travers, M.A., CADC III
Program Replication Manager
Insight Prison Project



INSIGHT PRISON PROJECT

Board of Directors

Bev Shelby, President

Delia Ginorio

Sean Hutchinson

Justin Kohley

Dr. Frederic Luskin

*Billie Mizell,
Chair Emeritus*

Advisory Board

Jack Kornfield

Thich Nhat Hanh

Annie Lamott

Bishop William Swing

Alice Walker

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Kat Taylor

Laurence Colton

Sunny Schwartz

*The Honorable
Michael Berger*

Leonard Rubio
Executive Director

P.O. Box 29