

# Walk In Those Shoes

July 2024 Newsletter – ISSUE 11



## A Pandemic Christmas

By James Pruitt

During the Christmas holiday here, residents are given a holiday bag filled with a variety of snacks. This bag is often the only thing many guys receive, other than a rough time, and it is looked forward to each year. After one such holiday, we were all in good spirits, having received our bags, and my friend slipped his under his bunk before leaving for his regular bible study. When he got back - the bag was gone. Stolen! It was heart-wrenching to see the devastation in my friend's eyes, to hear the hurt in his voice, knowing this was all he had.

As word of the theft spread, our unit of about 128 guys became charged with an awe-inspiring energy. A few guys, some of the 'worst haters', went around and collected snacks and cook-up and sodas. One guy even gave his own holiday bag. Total collected that day was five times the amount that had been stolen.

I watched in gratitude as my friend, a sex-offender, was given a better replacement bag than the one stolen. It was a beautiful sight, seeing a broken heart being restored with hope, love, generosity and simple *humanness*. His holiday became much more than it would have been, because my friend was someone who never received mail, never used the phone, and who felt no one cared. He was a man who always had to hustle for everything he got, and he finally experienced being cared for.

It made my holiday that much better too. I received the gift of seeing the true spirit of giving in this environment. It was difficult to not look at these guys and realize that in spirit we are all the same, that our appearance, race, sexual orientation, gender, criminal history or anything else - doesn't matter.

We are judged on all those things by society, considered unworthy, unredeemable, unlovable, the worst of the worst. But through our actions and the kindness shown to my friend, this community broke that stereotype.

Yes, we have all made some terrible decisions in our lives, decisions that we will continue to pay for beyond our time in this prison with the stigma of being ex-felons. I believe, given care, hope and love, these same men who are sons, fathers, brothers, husbands and friends will be seen more for their beautiful, generous hearts than the mistakes made in their past.

### July Writing Prompt

**Describe a time when you had to make a difficult choice.**

If you would like to submit your writing for consideration on our website at [www.walkinthoseshoes.com](http://www.walkinthoseshoes.com) or for inclusion in upcoming newsletters, please submit only unpublished work to:

**Walk In Those Shoes  
P.O. Box 70092  
Henrico, VA 23255**

Writers whose essays are chosen for Page 1 of the monthly newsletter will receive \$25 upon publication.

If you would like to support WITS, 501c(3) please donate at  
[www.walkinthoseshoes.com](http://www.walkinthoseshoes.com)  
or P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

# WRITER'S RESOURCE

PEN America, through its PEN Prison and Justice Writing program, has been supporting writing within prisons for years in various ways including guidance, contests and publication. This year they rolled out something new, hoping to encourage and support writers even further with a writing curriculum. We believe it would be very helpful for someone embarking on the creative writing path.

This curriculum is designed to serve as a companion to the book *The Sentences that Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison*, which is also available through PEN America, **at not cost** to writers who are incarcerated. The book can be ordered and sent to an incarcerated writer by filling out a form at: <https://pen.org/freewrite-curricula/>

The newly rolled out curriculum, *Freewrite Curricula*, is also available **at no cost** at <https://pen.org/freewrite-curricula/>, and is designed in two formats - one specifically designed for use by facilitators within an institution and also one that requires less oversight and direction for use in a setting where there are less resources for facilitation.

**WITS would love to hear from anyone utilizing these resources, both positive feedback, as well as any bumps in the road. WITS has no affiliation with PEN America.**

FOR MORE WRITING FROM PRISONS, RESOURCES & ARCHIVED NEWSLETTERS VISIT <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/>

**WITS published its first Newsletter in 2023, eight years after it first began sharing writing and news from inside prisons, and four years after being established as a 501c3 in 2019.**

**We recognize the need to not only keep costs minimal, but also compensate contributors, when possible, through writing contests as well as front page essay fees. Because of that, WITS Newsletters are offered for free download at: <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/newsletter/>**

**We encourage supporters to print and distribute copies, at no cost.**

Should you like to receive the newsletter directly from WITS, please send a check or money order in the amount of \$2.00 per desired issues to cover printing and mailing costs, made out to **Walk In Those Shoes**, at **P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, VA 23255**. Be sure to include mailing instructions and complete address for your facility.

## THE NUMBERS

THERE ARE OVER 200,000  
PEOPLE LIVING IN PRISONS IN THE  
UNITED STATES WHO  
WILL NOT OUTLIVE THEIR  
SENTENCE

# LWOP Sentencing

## An Overview

United States LWOP population = approximately 53,000  
England & Wales LWOP population = 59  
Australia LWOP population < 15

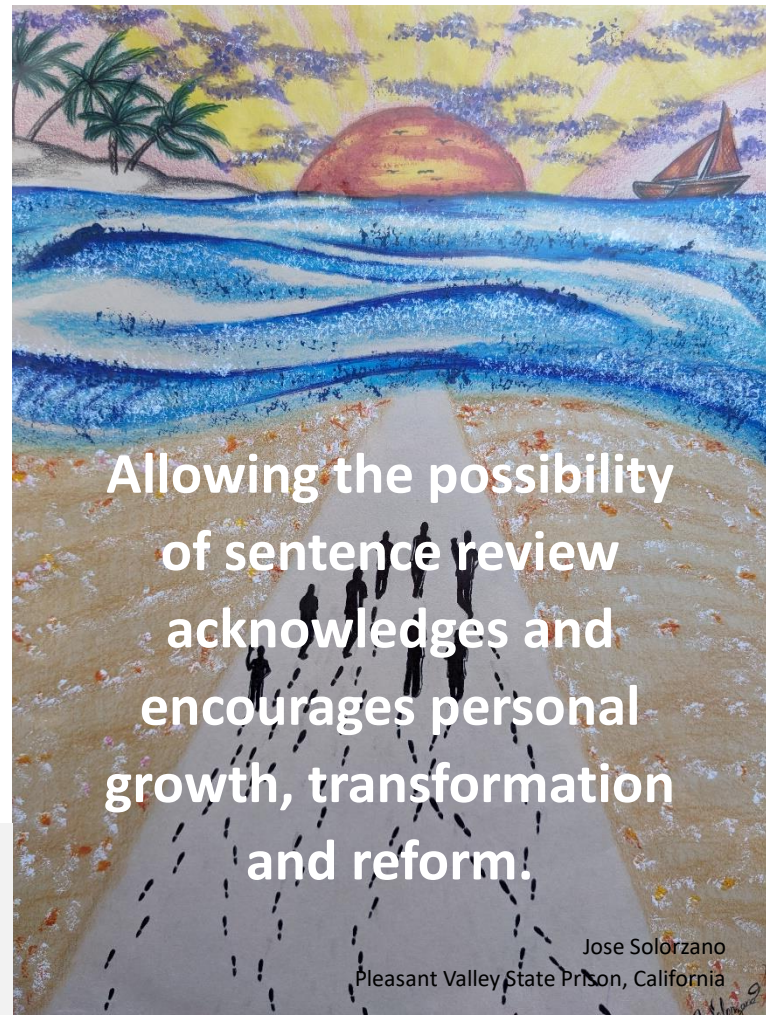
The 55+ prisoner population in NC had never been above 1,500 before sentencing reform in 1994.  
In 2018, the 55+ prison population rose to almost **9,000**.

*The European Court of Human Rights has taken the position that, “a prospect of release for the prisoner and a possibility of review” are required or a life sentence violates Article Three: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”*

**There are more people serving LWOP sentences in the U.S. than at any other time in the history of our country.**

**A correctional system that maintains Life Without Parole sentencing ultimately maintains ‘maximum security convalescent homes’**

As people in prison grow older, their cost of incarceration increases. According to the Sentencing Project in 2004, imprisonment from the age of 30 to 70 years costs more than \$1 million.

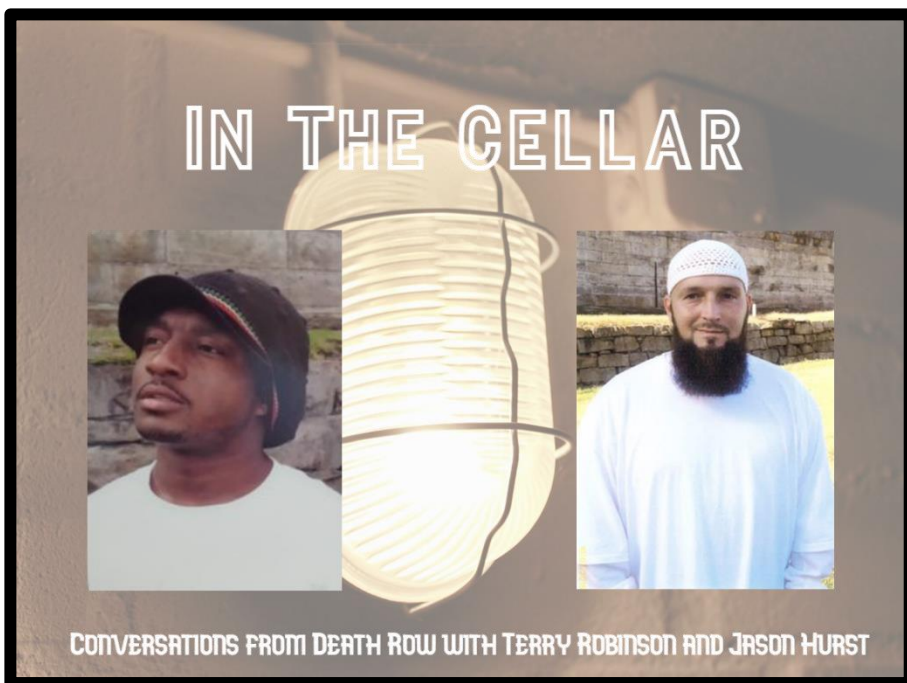


**Allowing the possibility of sentence review acknowledges and encourages personal growth, transformation and reform.**

Jose Solorzano  
Pleasant Valley State Prison, California

Baumgartner, F., Daniely, T., Huang, K., Johnson, S., Love, A., May, L., . . . Washington, K. (2021). Throwing away the key: The unintended consequences of “tough-on-crime” laws. *Perspectives on Politics*, 19(4), 1233-1246. doi:10.1017/S153759272100164X

Leigey, M. E., & Schartmueller, D. (2019). The fiscal and human costs of life without parole. *The Prison Journal* (Philadelphia, Pa.), 99(2), 241–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885519825496>



IN JULY, WITS WILL BE ROLLING  
OUT A NEW PROJECT,  
*IN THE CELLAR.*

IN THE CELLAR WAS CREATED BY  
TWO WITS WRITERS WHO LIVE  
ON DEATH ROW AND HOPE TO  
BRING GREATER INSIGHT INTO ALL  
THAT DEATH SENTENCING  
ENCOMPASSES.

On **July 9, 2024**, WITS shared the first episode of *In The Cellar*, a podcast created by two WITS writers. *In The Cellar* features weekly table talk sessions from NC Death Row. The writers aim to explore the challenges, tragedies and triumphs of living with a death sentence. *In The Cellar* will be hosted by Jason Mumin Hurst and Terry Chanton Robinson, two men amongst the many Death Row residents who are pursuing constructive ways to effect change. The podcast strives to remain balanced and bring awareness to those in and outside of prisons and will occasionally provide insight from the civilian point of view and experience.

*In The Cellar* will highlight the psychological impact of living with the looming threat of lethal injection. Chanton and Mumin will explore family connections, both broken and restored, community development, spiritual growth, and friendships founded on acts of decency. They will relive the heartbreak of having lost loved ones over the years and the difficulty of finding closure, as well as recount stories of exoneration, mental illness, past trauma, accountability, healing, and of course – executions.

Join them as they crack the door and shine light into one of prison's darkest reaches and attempt to provide valuable insight into the practice of murdering murderers in the name of justice. The hope is to substantiate the redeeming qualities of those incarcerated, knowing that while they may be awaiting execution, according to [Prison Policy Initiative, 610,000 others are being released back into society each year](#)\*. Their release plays a key role in society's restoration, restoration that also takes place *In The Cellar*, on NC Death Row.

Each episode of *In The Cellar* will also be shared on [Spotify](#), beginning on July 9, 2024, and links to all *In The Cellar* episodes as well as any *In The Cellar* news, can be found at: <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/category/in-the-cellar/>

# Broken Decisions: The Not So Easy Fix of Clemency

By Terry Robinson

NC Death Row is once again spinning constructively on its axis, whirling change underway. Previously, came therapy programs, tablets, and GED classes; all preludes to something major. Now the Governor's office is accepting clemency requests from all NC Death Row prisoners, a decision that could dissolve the mental anguish of prolonged executions and grant some deserving prisoners a second chance. The move comes as the conclusion of Roy Cooper's term as Governor draws near. After countless demonstrations and online petitions calling for the end of executions, death penalty abolitionists are on the brink of a monumental victory. Though nothing is ever guaranteed in politics, the decision by the Governor to accept clemency requests means due consideration is being taken to vacate NC death sentences... but whirling change can be dizzying indeed, and also rather complicated.

In recent weeks there have been a number of appellate attorneys visiting Death Row to acquire the consent of prisoners to file for clemency on their behalf. The preferred deadline is July 1, 2024, but there are qualifications to file at later dates. The commutation packet consists of 90 questions ranging from appellate procedures to prison accomplishments, seemingly designed to examine every facet of the petitioner's conviction. There is even a claim to be made for factual innocence, which in itself recognizes the possibility of the wrongfully convicted. But where factual innocence is a case for clemency, actual innocence is cause for exoneration, so for some few like myself, clemency is not the desired outcome. However, for the many men here who've long taken accountability for their crimes in the effort to reform, clemency is a glorious alternative... or is it?

After having spoken to some of the guys here about being granted clemency, I've found the responses polarizing. Some view clemency as offering relief from the dreadful toll of facing execution, others scoff at the notion. The latter believe having their death sentence commuted to Life Without Parole, a more placid death sentence in the form of dying in prison from old age, is not so much a favorable condition. Having nestled decades in Death Row's moderate environment, the long-term seclusion can generate cases of institutionalization and social stagnation. The same rules that govern here do not apply in general population, which will require the stringent process of deprogramming.

For those with the capability to conform, this process will be essential to their security... but what about those who fail to adopt the code of conduct? This difficult transition is almost certain to be the case for the many NC Death Row prisoners without prior convictions whose only model of prison is a complacent Death Row. One guy here said receiving LWOP and being transferred to G-POP would be like being sent to prison for the very first time, except he's already been in prison for 31 years; something about that feels seriously wrong. Another man stated, "Why would I want to spend the last years of my life with the daily intrusion of having to shower, use the toilet, and sleep around a bunch of untrustworthy strangers when I have all this privacy right here on Death Row." Another guy preferred to stick it out in the 4th Circuit appellate court for a chance at Life *With* The Possibility of Parole, as opposed to accepting clemency and LWOP.

Few others expressed legitimate reasons why they, too, would reject the request for clemency, which I find understandable, yet disappointing. Much of that disappointment is of my own doing, hoping vacated death sentences would be a cure-all. Though I agree clemency isn't in the best interest of every Death Row prisoner, it's still a step in the right direction - but it doesn't put an end to the death penalty. And there is also the fight against mass incarceration, racial disparity in the courts, and the lack of resources for prisoners reentering society. Criminal justice reform addresses a wide range of systemic brokenness that cannot be made whole with one easy fix. Still, having any governor vacate death sentences is a promising start towards long term goals, even if it doesn't serve every individual. Death penalty abolitionists have remained too vigilant over the years to have their devotion be in vain. One group in particular, The NC Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (NCCADP), was a key factor in Governor Roy Cooper's consideration to review clemency. They organized rallies outside Central Prison, the Legislative office, and the governor's mansion, determined to sway hardened minds with their calls for humanity. It is because of the NCCADP, the Center for Death Penalty Litigation, and other supporters that commutations for all NC Death Row prisoners is a real possibility, so to have some men here express disinterest in clemency feels a bit undermining and ungrateful.

Yet I, for one, won't be filing a clemency request because I am innocent of the crimes that brought me to Death Row. Others may not file for their own reasons, refusing to accept LWOP as a tradeoff for the inevitable. Yet there are many here who are taking full advantage of the opportunity for leniency. Though LWOP fails to recognize rehabilitation and merit, it does not compare to facing execution. And who knows if the governor will even vacate all death sentences or uphold the historical inequities of trial courts, but for those valiant humanitarians who've helped us get to this point, your dedication is not for naught.

**MORE WRITING BY TERRY ROBINSON, AKA CHANTON, CAN BE FOUND AT: <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/author/chanton/>**