

March 28, 2019

TO: The Honorable Floyd Prozanski, Chair
The Honorable Kim Thatcher, Vice-Chair
Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee

FR: Rod Berg, Prison Minister

RE: Support for youth justice reform SB 969, SB 966, SB 1008, SB 968

It is a privilege and honor to share my journey with you today.

For the past 50 years I have dedicated my life to helping kids. My wife and I have been married 58 years this coming May and we were blessed with four wonderful children. They have blessed us with five grand kids and now three great grand kids. All of them have taught us a lot about loving and living.

I became the executive director of Mid-Valley Youth for Christ in Salem beginning October 2nd 1972 and in the late 70's I began visiting kids at MacLaren and Hillcrest before it closed. Today we know these places as part of OYA. Than about the same time I began serving as the volunteer chaplain at Marion County Detention.

As I spent time at these three locations I was able to visit and help process with 1000's of kids. I dealt with kids with minor issues who just needed a loving nudge to get back on track but I also spent many hours with the kids who were charged with extreme crimes. Because I had a good trusting relationship with judges and attorneys I was often asked to help with their cases emotionally.

As I sat with these kids it was not my position to judge them but it was my desire, with God's help, to let these kids know I was going to be with them and help them face the future with HOPE.

Many of these contacts have turned into relationships that have lasted more than 25 years. As our relationships started I watched these young boys struggle with rules, staff relations and other boys wanting to fight over stupid issues. We often talked about taking time to think and make the right choice. This went on for years and I watched them grow mentally, physically and socially. Now as I visit them as adults they are able to properly deal with the rules, the staff and even the fights that happen in their area. They not only make wise choices but they take proper care of themselves and they are involved with the younger guys helping them develop a proper attitude and not get involved in the gang stuff. I have witnessed these guys become healthy and educated young men. And, I don't share any of this lightly because growing up incarcerated and still become as successful as they have they deserve a lot of credit and respect.

These young men (and women) are living proof of the power of Love, Respect, Hope, and Mercy. They face each day knowing their past but still are seeking a path to move forward positively. They know forgiveness is hard and does not come easy and they also know forgiveness does not mean we forget. But as we forgive we can seek a healthy future for everyone.

Remember, the choice each kid made as a 15 year-old does not reflect who they are today.