



Ron Cupp

When Debra’s husband Ron died in prison, she was devastated. But then she started telling his story. She’s still in grief, but she’s channeled some of that feeling into action and advocacy.

It all started with a promise to my husband. I was with him in the visiting room of the prison where he was incarcerated, and though I didn’t know it at the time, it would be one of the last times I would ever get to see him. Ronnie was close to dying and he could barely sit up in the green plastic chair across from me. “Don’t stop trying,” he said. I remember leaning in closer to hear those words. “Keep pushing even after I’m gone.” He said he wanted me to make sure no one else had to go through what we had endured. He was very ill, and we’d been trying to get some help from the doctors for a while. Then when we realized how sick he was, we focused on trying to get him home for his short remaining time. This was a hugely painful struggle.

Months before, when Ronnie first started complaining of terrible stomach pain, prison medical staff ignored him. Finally, he was diagnosed with terminal metastatic colon cancer and we began the process of applying for compassionate release.



You wouldn't think it would be so hard. Back in the 1980s, Congress put the program of compassionate release in place so people like Ronnie – who'd served much of their sentences and were near dying – could go home and be with their loved ones as they passed. It makes perfect sense: Let the family and the prisoner experience one of the most fundamental experiences of what it means to be human together, especially when the person is no longer any threat at all. But there is nothing simple about it. To get compassionate release, prisoners have to go through a lengthy application process, get approved by the Bureau of Prisons, and then a judge grants the release. I had to bring a paralegal onboard to help us with the application, it was so much paperwork. Finally, we turned the papers in the way we were supposed to, but it took the Bureau of Prisons so long to make a decision that Ronnie died before it came through.

After he passed I thought about that promise I'd made to him. I knew I had to start telling our story, to make people understand the injustice. It seemed so hard to talk to people I didn't really know and tell them the whole story. There are some things about Ronnie's story that I feel sort of ashamed of. My husband was an addict. When he went to prison, I was embarrassed. Then I realized that Ronnie was also taken advantage of by the justice system, too. Most definitely after he became ill. That finally compelled me more to want to fight for people like him and families like ours.

I decided to start talking. I began finding other people – more than I ever imagined – who had gone through the same thing. We shared our stories.

A big moment came this past summer. I went to FAMM's rally and lobby day event, and there was a dinner where people stood up and told their stories. I was nervous, but finally I went up to the mic and started talking. The room became really quiet and some people were crying, just like I was. It's a sad story. It was so helpful to have everybody's compassion. It was also kind of heartbreaking because it brought it all back and it felt very fresh again. It felt real again. However, it also brought a feeling of relief.

The next day I went with a group of people just like me to Capitol Hill and we met with our lawmakers. I had a few minutes to tell my story to my senators' staffs. It felt very empowering to be



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able to go talk to them, tell our story, have them listen and be concerned. I felt like our story mattered.

Storytelling is the key. Getting people to understand a little bit more what is actually happening in terms of our justice system. And I do know this: It's a whole different compassion level for a listener when you've got the person there in front of you telling their story, and you hear the emotions and what they're saying and how they feel, how you feel their strength to be there to do it.

I'm not going to stop telling my story and pushing for change. I think the more people hear it, it can make a difference. I made a promise to Ronnie how I'm going to do this, and it's not just for him, but for me, too. He may not be here with me, but I'm still fighting for him and all the prisoners like him. Otherwise I feel like I deserted him. Somehow, though, I feel like he's still with me.

