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## How I turned my life around and why others deserve the opportunity to do the same

**Carissa McGee** Your view

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Senate Bill 247 — the Second Chance Bill — would abolish juvenile life without parole in New Mexico and would provide early eligibility for parole review for those serving long adult sentences for crimes committed when they were children. I support SB247 because I know from personal experience that children — even those who commit serious violence — can once again become safe, productive members of their societies and communities. I know because I was one of those children.

When I was 16 years old, I was arrested for two counts of attempted murder. I was tried as an adult and sentenced to 21 years in an adult correctional facility. It took me several years to mature and grow into a different person, this is true, but I was able to make the necessary growth. I did the tough work of healing from my past traumas, abuse and mental health disorders. Because of my own personal journey, I can say with confidence — our young people deserve second chances.

I was lucky enough to serve a sentence that gave me that second chance. Unlike others, my adult sentence carried a light at the end of the tunnel. I had a date for a parole board hearing, an opportunity to show the changed person I was. But I know that there are many in New Mexico deprived of this chance. There are 75 people in New Mexico serving sentences longer than 15 years for crimes committed when they were children. Many are serving sentences that mean they will spend the rest of their lives in prison. Many have already served decades in prison — some over 40 years — for crimes committed when they were 15 or 16. Those people are just as capable of and worthy of redemption as I was.

I was first introduced to the concept of healing one's trauma through acts of service when I was 20 years old; already four years into my incarceration. I gotta admit, the concept seemed counterintuitive, but I really didn't have anything to lose. I had already lost everything — my freedom, my family, my friends, my dignity, my college scholarships — so I gave acts of service a try. Thank goodness I did because I discovered my life's purpose — serving others.

Through my current work with Project ECHO, I reenter prison facilities across the state to educate, develop skills, and inspire hope. I also officiate basketball for middle and high school teams and, when given the opportunity I share my story to inspire youth to overcome their traumas in a healthy way. I also advocate for the supportive needs of the LGBTQI+ population because I know the difficulties and pain that come from rejection of sexual identity and/or orientation. My contribution to society is, in a way, my "thank you" to my higher power for a second chance and it's also where I find my peace, knowing I am doing all I can to be of service to my community.

I am one example of why we should give a second chance to children who are sentenced as adults. We are your neighbors, family, friends, sports fans and coworkers. I am all of those things and more. I am a proud New Mexico citizen and I love my community. I want to see all of us live a happy, meaningful, and safe life and, in order to do that, I believe we have to help each other heal.

Supporting SB247 doesn't relinquish any of the blame or responsibility, and it will not swing open the prison doors. This bill — which is modeled after legislation that has worked in other states — will give those serving long adult sentences for crimes committed when they were children an opportunity to show how they have done. I hit that second chance out of the park. I know others will as well.

*Carissa McGee is an author, an advocate for Returning Citizens, and a basketball official. She lives in Albuquerque with her wife and their two pitbulls.*