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MY VIEW SHANNON BROWN FLEESON

New Mexico should embrace power of hope

By Shannon Brown Fleeson
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We are survivors of juvenile violence. This is why we support the Second Chance bill.

We are writing as people who have been directly harmed by young offenders or who have lost loved ones to youth violence, to add our voices to the diverse chorus supporting New Mexico's Senate Bill 43, the Second Chance bill.

The bill being considered by the Legislature would abolish life without the possibility of parole for children sentenced as adults and make them eligible to apply for parole after 15 years in prison. New Mexico has the opportunity to join 26 other states and jurisdictions, including its neighbors of Texas, Colorado and Utah, in affirming that children have a second chance at hope and redemption.

As people who have lost a loved one to or experienced youth violence, we do not take this issue lightly. But it is because of, not in spite of, those experiences that we encourage our lawmakers to support SB 43.

Our individual journeys have been marked by grief, anger and many unanswered questions. Although our lives have been forever altered by the violent actions of people who were under 18 at the time, we are firm in our conviction that children never cease to be deserving of compassion and concern. They represent both the most vulnerable members of our community and our most valuable resource as we work for a more just future.

When children cause harm, as they did in our lives, it is important to hold them accountable in age-appropriate ways that leave room for the profound potential they have to experience dramatic positive transformation. We are deeply committed to the hope of redemption and a belief that all of us are

more than the worst thing we have ever done. We urge our lawmakers to pass this bill and enact youth sentencing policies that are in harmony with these fundamental values.

Through our own process of healing, we have come to know many people who were incarcerated as children, some of whom have served decades for crimes they committed before they were old enough to vote or, in some cases, even drive a car. We have seen with our own eyes that redemption is possible. When a young person is given a second chance, they can accomplish so much good and, in this way, try to make up for the harm they caused.

These individuals are making countless meaningful contributions to their communities by raising loving families, serving as mentors to at-risk youth, and working as school teachers, substance abuse counselors, restorative justice practitioners and advocates for sentencing reform. It is truly a blessing to stand in solidarity with people whose lives bear witness that we should never give up on a child.

SB 43 is about making sure all children have hope because every child matters and is worthy of our care and concern. It's time New Mexico embraces the power of hope and redemption and, like more than half the nation, gives our young people a second chance at life.

This letter is signed by a group of people, all of whom have been directly harmed by young offenders or who have lost loved ones to youth violence: Shannon Brown Fleeson, Regina Griego, Rukiye Abdul-Mutakallim, Srletta Evans, Paul LaRuffa, Isa Nichols, Linda White and Valencia Warren-Gibbs.