

**STATEMENT OF RAPHAEL B. JOHNSON**  
**IN SUPPORT OF**  
**The Juvenile Justice Accountability and Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 4300**  
**House Judiciary Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security**  
**September 11, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify here today. I give honor to God for my life and the mercy I have been shown. My name is Raphael Bernard Johnson. I am before you as someone who, as a teenager, committed a horrible, senseless crime. An innocent person lost his life because of me – something I regret more than I could ever say, and something I will have to live with for the rest of my life. I am a man who spent my young adulthood in prison. By the grace of God I did not receive a life without parole sentence, and because of that I was released from prison, and have dedicated my life to making amends. I would like to tell you my story in hopes that it illustrates how important it is for young people to get second chances.

I grew up in a Detroit neighborhood known for gun violence and drug dealing. My father went to prison when I was twenty-two months old. My mother was alone as the head of our house. She worked long hours in order to compensate for the fact that she had no one to rely on. I now know that I direly needed a role model, and I searched in desperate places to find one. As a child and youth, I looked to the streets and to tough men. I wanted to somehow be like to them, and to be accepted. I wanted to be tough. I wanted to be a gangster. I thought these things would make me a man. I know now just how distorted that perception was.

My first arrest came when I stole my grandmother's gun. I was twelve years old. I took it to school to build a tough-man persona. At fourteen, I was sent to a boys home for four years.

There, things began to look up for me. I was given a full scholarship to attend the University of Detroit High School. I excelled in high school. I was on the honor roll. I was the captain of the football team. I was even homecoming king. I had a lot going for me, and still, I was an adolescent who could not think clearly before he acted, could not control his anger or walk away from conflict.

When I was 17 years old, I did the most horrible thing that anyone could ever do to another human being. The night it happened, I went with friends from school to a party. We were thrown out of the party for horseplay. Once we were outside, we had a physical altercation, and I was thrown to the ground. In front of my friends, I was embarrassed, frightened, and angry. Without thinking, I acted out of rage and fear. One of my friends had a gun in his car. I ran to get it, returned and fired it three times. The bullets I shot killed someone who was not even involved in the scuffle I had just had. It was the most cowardly act imaginable.

What was in my head at the time? I didn't think about my future. I didn't comprehend that I was ending someone else's life and future. Later I learned his name was Mr. Johnny Havard. I think years passed before I was mature enough to really understand what I had done.

I was tried as an adult and found guilty. I was very fortunate that I did not get life without parole. The circumstances of the case and the fact that my supporters got me good attorneys meant that I narrowly escaped a charge that would have resulted in life without parole. I was sentenced to 10-25 years in prison.

Like a lot of youth offenders who are sentenced to adult prison, the early years of my incarceration were not perfect by far. I was still misguided, with an unclear understanding of manhood. I violated the prison rules three times: for a fight, assault, and threatening behavior. These infractions resulted in my spending nearly six years in solitary confinement where I was

locked down for 23 hours a day, without fresh air and little natural light. Something happened when I was about 25 years old, and I began to change. I got tired. My exhaustion with this meaningless life propelled me to do everything in my power to change who I was and who I was becoming.

As the years went by, I grew up inside that cell. Over time, I began to come to terms with myself and to look at what I had done. I began to detest my crime and I came to understand Mr. Havard and his family as human beings. I began to think of what I had put them through and I wrote letters trying to express my apologies and beg for forgiveness. Each letter would be returned with an “address expired” stamp affixed to it.

Because I had the chance of parole, a chance that thousands of other young offenders do not have, I had hope. From day one I saw light at the end of the tunnel. I had something to work towards, and the dream of helping others, having a family, making a difference in the world seemed like a possibility. I immersed myself in education and vocation. I read over 1,300 books and wrote three of my own. I took advantage of all available programming and became a certified carpenter, plumber, electrician and paralegal. I thought about my faith and relationship with God. In doing so, I learned self-discipline. I began to search my soul. Through this self-introspection I was able to question my thinking of the past, develop a value system and have a deeper understanding of my actions. I realized I was lying to myself about what really happened the night of my crime, and I was living a life where I blamed others for situations I got into. In short, I matured. I grew up. I did the things that a young adult should do, leaving behind adolescence.

I was able to do this in part because I had a strong desire to make up for the harm I had done. In addition, I had the support of family and friends who sent letters, money, and clothes

and visited me. There were community ties which included business owners, clergy, elected officials and educators. I was also fortunate because through all of this, I had people who believed in me and supported me. Father Don Vettese, a Jesuit priest, stayed in touch through letters, giving me hope. He continues to assist me today. My father, who had transformed himself from a gangster to a correctional officer (for nearly 25 years now) also inspired me. I focused on what I could do to right my wrong – to somehow atone for the innocent life I had taken. I began to concentrate on who I was going to be upon release rather than what I was going to do when released.

Twelve years after the senseless and unwarranted murder of Mr. Johnny Havard, I was released from prison. I have been out four years. I went to college and last year I received my B.A. summa cum laude from the University of Detroit Mercy. I married my childhood sweetheart, Schannon, and she has given me two beautiful children. I started my own company where I do motivational speaking and conflict resolution all around the country. I work with Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit as a Community Reintegration Coordinator where I help ex-offenders successfully re-enter society. I am a published author and have appeared in the media, and I am a community activist. I am currently working on a Master's degree and expect to be finished by December 2008. For my Master's project, I will produce a new book and curriculum to help ex-offenders successfully re-enter society.

I humbly submit to you that everyone makes mistakes, errors in judgment, and decisions that we wish we could undo at a later time – especially young people. In many, many ways, I am not the same person I was at age 17. I did things then that I could never do now. I have chosen a different path. What I want to convey to you is that for any juvenile offender who commits a crime as horrible and senseless as mine, there is still hope. A teenager is not fully formed yet.

I think about my actions that night every single day. I think about Mr. Havard's mother who once declared in the courtroom that she could never forgive me. Now, many years later, I have another, deeper understanding of her pain. I look at my two year old son and my baby daughter and when I imagine them being murdered by a teenager, I think I have a clearer sense of her hurt and anger. However, I also can empathize with the errors of a misguided teenager who acts without thinking and takes the life of another person.

I humbly ask you to vote for H.R. 4300 and do so in recognition that no adolescent is beyond hope of redemption, and every young person should have the chance to prove that they can change and be afforded the opportunity to make the difference. Thank you.