Commentary: Lifting Mandatory Life Terms for Juveniles Is Right Decision

The Supreme Court ruling bars mandatory life sentences without the possibility of parole for children. I have not given up on young people, even after my child was killed by another.

By Aqeela Sherills
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My 18-year-old son Terrell was shot and killed by another young person more than eight years ago.

The person who killed Terrell was never arrested. I want him be held accountable, but I don’t think he should go to jail for the rest of his life. I think our children — and all of us — are worth more than that.

That is why I applauded the U.S. Supreme Court ruling earlier this week that declared it unconstitutional to impose mandatory sentences of life without the possibility of parole on children. We should not give up on people, nor should we suggest that a child’s value can be summed up by his worst act.

I understand how children get into trouble. As a young person, I made plenty of bad decisions. Growing up in the Jordan Downs housing projects in Watts gave a young person few options. With the lack of youth programs and services, I joined the neighborhood gang. I witnessed things that no young person
should. When I was in ninth grade, my good friend Ronzell was shot and killed at school. That was a turning point for me.

I have spent my entire adult life working to bring peace and healing to my communities. At 19, Hall of Fame football great Jim Brown and I co-founded the Amer-I-Can Program, an organization to heal gang violence around the country. In 1992, working with my brother and a few other key individuals, I forged a "Peace Treaty" between the Crips and Bloods in Watts, creating a domino effect across the country for urban peace treaties amongst warring gangs.

I raised four of my children as a single father. Terrell was the oldest. While home on break from Humboldt State University, he was shot to death at a party in an affluent black neighborhood. One theory is that a Crip may have mistaken Terrell for a Blood because he had a red Mickey Mouse sweater slung over his shoulder.

Terrell died within the hour. I ultimately forgave the killer because I know that the real villain is what has gone wrong in our culture that has led us to devalue the lives of one another.

The Supreme Court has taken an important step in the right direction. Thankfully, judges now will have to consider mitigating factors, such as a child’s age, history of abuse and neglect, and the circumstances of a crime when determining a sentence. But I think that we can go even further because no child should ever be told he or she deserves to die in prison.

Children can change. I am proof positive of that. Our children deserve our support and, sometimes, a second chance, to become all that they can.

_Aqeela Sherills is the regional director for Resources for Human Development and is the Southern California outreach coordinator for California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty._