Commentary: Contemplating National Crime Victims’ Week

The mother of a 3-year-old homicide victim supports holding young people accountable for their crimes, but life-without-parole sentences for juveniles is not the answer.

By Sharletta Evans
Posted: 04/25/2012 04:24 PM EDT

Nearly 17 years ago, my three-year-old son, Casson Xavier "Biscuit" Evans, was killed in a drive-by shooting. I could not have imagined that I would someday want to see the shooter released from prison or that I would become an advocate for ending the practice of sentencing children to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

It was December 21, 1995. There had been shootings by rival gangs the night before in my niece’s neighborhood in Denver and I had gone by to pick up her child. Casson was sleeping, so I left him and his 6-year-old brother, Calvin, in the car with two older cousins — one 17 and the other 22. I had been inside only briefly when I heard gunshots. Casson was shot in the crossfire. He died in my arms.

Three children were arrested and held responsible. Raymond and Paul were 14; the driver, Damien, was
15. I knew I could heal only if I forgave the boys. Yet, I felt the prosecutors’ recommendation of life sentences without the possibility of parole represented justice.

By the time Colorado legislators made their second attempt — in 2006 — to eliminate these sentences for youth, I’d had a change of heart. Today, I am a strong believer in restorative justice and am working with the Colorado Department of Corrections in hopes of meeting face-to-face with Raymond. I want to tell him in person about Casson and about my pain. And I want to tell him that I forgive him.

The boys responsible for Casson’s death were not monsters. As every parent knows, children often make decisions without thinking through the consequences. We know from science that teenagers’ brains are still developing, particularly the parts that affect judgment and impulse. This also makes them particularly amenable to rehabilitation, which should be the focus of any punishment imposed upon children.

As we observe 2012’s National Crime Victims’ Week on April 22 through 28, I am encouraged by the theme, “Extending the Vision: Reaching Every Victim.” As the mother of a homicide victim who also supports holding young people accountable for their crimes in an age-appropriate way that focuses on rehabilitation and reintegration into society, my voice has been marginalized by those who favor harsher alternatives such as life-without-parole sentences.

Just as my view has changed, so can society’s. I have channeled my grief into nurturing, training and affirming the young people in our community. I have started a nonprofit organization that is working on the front end to reduce crime, bullying and gang activity.

I also am energized and will continue to work to eliminate this sentence for children. I invite you to join me. Reach me at vomi@recreationcenterhubb.org or visit my website at www.recreationcenterhubb.org.

Sharletta C. Evans is the founder of the nonprofit, faith-based Red Cross Blue Shield (RCBS) Gang Prevention, Inc. This organization was born out of Sharletta’s need for healing after the 1995 drive-by shooting that resulted in the death of her three-year-old son, Casson.