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 Legislative District 24
 Prince George's County

Finance Committee

Joint Committees

Children, Youth, and Families

Ending Homelessness

Fair Practices and State Personnel Oversight

Management of Public Funds

Protocol



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
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Good Afternoon: To the Honorable Chairman, Vice Chairman and
 Members of the Judiciary Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you in strong support of Senate Bill 16-181 which will give a wonderful opportunity for a young man who is personally dear to my heart and one who I know has struggled from birth to get hold of acceptance, but was rejected and misled by those he thought to be accepting of his well-being. As you read this testimony, I hope that you will feel deep compassion for my student.

I've learned that people will forget what you've said, some will forget what you've done, but most people will never forget how you made them feel.

In May of 1985, I assumed the position as school principal of John H. Bayne Elementary School located in Capitol Heights, Maryland. It was there that I met Curtis A. Brooks who came in as a first grader. There were mornings when he would enter the school crying. At first, I thought it was because he did not want to come to school. Thinking that it may be another reason, I felt in order to fully understand what was happening in this child's life, it would be better for me to make a home visit. When I arrived at his home, I was warmly greeted by his grandmother who expressed concerns about Curtis. She told me about his mother and there was no father in his life. I visited his home on several occasions. The visits were very revealing and extremely helpful. After the first home visit, I returned to John H. Bayne, met with the teachers and counselors to put the resources in place to insure support and success for Curtis. He made a great adjustment and did very well during his time at John Bayne.

Our goal was to bring out the best and brightest attributes of Curtis and other students. Curtis was intelligent and we shared a great relationship with his grandmother. What particularly stood out was his desire to be a part, to be included and to be wanted. Realizing that, I requested to the Superintendent that I receive a male counselor to work with Curtis and other students at our school. Curtis went from first to sixth grade. After ensuring that Curtis made a decent transition to middle school, I took on the awesome challenge in seeking a political office and becoming a member of the Maryland House of Delegates for the 24th

Legislative District in Prince George's County where I served for 20 years. I went to Annapolis, Maryland, to make life better for all children including Curtis Brooks.

I want everyone to know I deeply and genuinely believe in Curtis' talents and I know he would be an asset to society as a successful productive citizen. I am also fully aware of his struggles in life.

It was not until Wednesday, January 16, 2013, that I became aware of Curtis' circumstances. Attorney Jennifer Mrachek and Investigator Cynthia Estes came to my office in Annapolis, Maryland, where I am now serving in my seventh year as State Senator, to completely brief me regarding Curtis. As a result of our discussion, I came to Denver on April 10, 2013, to begin to plead the case for Curtis Brooks because, I strongly believe someone should speak for him. I returned April 20th to present my thoughts and I am before you today. I was convinced then and I am convinced now that Curtis would be a model citizen in society. During the course of my many years of living, I've learned that making a "living" is not the same thing as helping someone advance his or her cause while living in this "life."

I invite you to please take into account the following:

1. Curtis Brooks left his support system in Maryland looking forward to bonding with his mother for a wholesome relationship. Instead, Curtis was in Denver, Colorado only two months when this tragic incident occurred.
2. Curtis Brooks lived in Prince George's County, Maryland and was never a problem in his community.
3. Curtis Brooks was not an ill-mannered, mean nasty or disrespectful child.
4. Curtis Brooks lived with his beloved grandmother and did not have the love, nurturing or support of his mother or father. Neither one was really a part of his life.
5. The entire staff of John H. Bayne Elementary School wrapped their arms around Curtis Brooks with the noblest attempt to fill the void that was lacking in his life.
6. Curtis Brooks was a very good student and did not participate in the drug culture.
7. I am compelled to believe that Curtis Brooks should be given the opportunity to return to Maryland where resources and a strong support system are waiting for him to pursue his dreams.
8. Please remember, Curtis Brooks was 15 years old, homeless, hopeless and helpless when this tragic incident occurred. He barely knew the guy who committed this incident.
9. I am convinced, without a shadow of doubt, Curtis Brooks does not have the heart to inflict harm to anyone.

I have been praying every day for my former student (Curtis A. Brooks) who I love so much. I did not work so hard with my staff and his grandmother to nurture, teach, mentor, motivate, encourage and do all we could for Curtis to see him thrown away for the rest of his life. Had I known of his misfortune prior to when I did, I would have been involved long before 2013. In the State of Maryland, Curtis was surrounded by LOVE. He endured a strong foundation to include some of the best and brightest teachers in the nation. Curtis has made

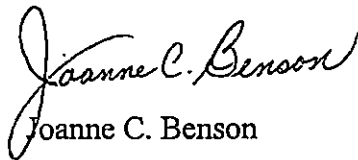
constructive use of his time since being incarcerated. He has taught himself four languages, he is working and is currently taking a college course. I am so reminded of a quote by Frederick Douglas which says, "It is better to prepare strong children than to repair broken men."

It is so hard for me to envision Curtis incarcerated. For me, Curtis is worth fighting for. We all are focused on the depth of his discipline as well as the breath of his intelligence.

With the greatest passion, I plead to your greatest level of judgment that you give a favorable response to Senate Bill 16-181, which will provide an opportunity and second chance not only for Curtis, but many who are like him. We are prepared to receive him as a family with LOVE, support and direction, along with open hearts and arms.

I am prepared to do whatever I can to help. I am further reminded of a quote by one of major league baseball's all-time players, Hank Aaron, who once said, "a white child might need a role model, but a black child needs more than that in society. He needs hope." We sincerely hope that Curtis A. Brooks will be given a much needed chance to blossom as I knew he would as my student.

Thank you,


Joanne C. Benson