OP-ED: I Believe in Restorative Justice for My Child’s Killer

By: Sharletta Evans | April 21, 2015

Ed Andrieski / AP

It has been nearly 20 years since my 3-year-old son, Casson Xavier “Biscuit” Evans, was killed in a drive-by shooting in Denver. Back then, I wanted the three teenagers charged with his death to spend the rest of their lives behind bars.

Today, I believe it serves no good to sentence a child to die in prison. It doesn’t bring back our lost loved ones and it fails to acknowledge that we are all better than the worst thing we have done. I want to see the young people involved in Casson’s death rehabilitated and, when they are ready, returned to society.
As we observe Victim Rights Awareness Week, I want to share the story of how I came to develop a relationship with the boy — who is now a young man — accused of pulling the trigger in Casson’s death and why I have agreed to take an important role in his life.

It was Dec. 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 had been shot in the crossfire. He died in my arms.

Three children were arrested and held responsible. Two were 16; the driver was 15. During the trial a few months later, Raymond, one of the 16-year-olds, said he would change places with Casson if he could. I had already forgiven the boys because I knew it was necessary for my own healing. But I was fine with prosecutors’ recommendation of life sentences without the possibility of parole. That seemed to represent justice.

But 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.

I opposed the first effort by Colorado legislators to eliminate life without parole sentences for youth. By their second effort — in 2006 — I’d had a change of heart. Today I am a strong believer in restorative justice.

Raymond and I had our first restorative justice dialogue in March 2012. I told him in person about Casson and about my pain. I also told him that I forgive him. Even when they are involved in serious crimes, once our children pay their debts to society, they should have a chance to return home to become productive citizens and to give back to their communities.

My phone number was recently added to the list that Raymond may call. In his first call to me, I told him that he sounds healthy and confident. He said that he does his best to keep a good disposition but sometimes gets depressed. He has called me several times since then. I enjoy his conversations, and his letters are becoming more expressive. I want Raymond to know he can be honest with me and speak from his heart. He seems to be taking that to heart.

The Department of Corrections has also approved my nonprofit organization, Victim Offender Mitigation Initiative (VOMI), to team with another organization to go into prisons and share our story with inmates in a 14-week, faith-based restorative justice curriculum.

As much as I would like to, I can’t go back to the days before Casson was killed. All I can do is try to help make sure no parent ever faces this pain and that both victims and offenders can heal from the traumas they have endured.

This week and always, I remind us that victims have a variety of perspectives, and many of us want to see reform in our juvenile sentencing practices. Children can and do change. Some
people may demonstrate that they are not ready to be released, but those who are should be granted that opportunity. That is necessary to ensure fairness for them and for our society.

I am energized and will continue to work on this issue. I invite you to join me.

Sharletta Evans lost her 3-year-old son to a drive-by shooting. She has become an advocate for restorative justice and elimination of extreme sentences for children. She is founder of the Re-Creation Center, an anti-gang nonprofit based in Aurora, Colo. She can be reached at www.vomi-rjustice.org.