



Beaten, Tortured and Sentenced 25-to-Life for Minor Drug Offense

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*"Woe to those who make unjust laws,
to those who issue oppressive decrees,
to deprive the poor of their rights,
and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people"*

- Isaiah 10:1

Often, during days that never seem to end, Anthony Williams will repair to a corner of his dark, dank, cell in the Eastern Correctional Facility in upstate New York. This is where he ponders, meditates, and prays. And prays and prays, using his faith to rekindle fading dreams that someday, soon, his nightmare will come to a merciful end. Then he rises to write yet another pro se motion, casting it like bread upon the waters of justice, hoping this will be the one that will not be denied by yet another faceless judge.

We of the outside world, even in our wildest imaginations, might never fully comprehend the life of Anthony Williams. Among the many cases chronicled by this office over a dozen years -- and we sometimes imagine that have seen it all -- none causes more loss of sleep than knowledge of the dreadful plight of Anthony Williams.

Williams is serving a 25-year-to-life sentence for a "mickey mouse" drug offense that occurred in Albany County back in 1991. Anthony has already served more than 17 years of that sentence, dragged in chains from one maximum-security prison to the next. Though he is among the least of small offenders, he is serving the longest of times. He just can't find his way home from perpetual exile behind thick walls trimmed with razor wire.

Yet, somehow, he remains optimistic and fights on. As does his cancer-stricken mother, Pastor Nazimova, a leader of the Mothers of the New York Disappeared.

From the onset, Williams' criminal justice journey has been a horror show. Prior to

even being charged, he was sequestered for eight hours in a motel room, where his arrest took place. During this ordeal, he was tortured and beaten senseless by rogue elements of the Albany Police Department's "Special Investigation Unit." Long before the degrading excesses of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, these police "interrogators" tried to forcibly extract "information" that Williams could not provide. Ultimately, he had to be rushed by ambulance from the motel to the county hospital for emergency care.

Fearful of having their brutal tactics exposed, the police then fabricated their alleged "big case" against Williams. After a painful recovery from extensive and severe wounds, his broken body and tattered soul were transported to the county courthouse, where the African-American youth was quickly convicted by an all-white jury and then punted to the state's dangerous prison system by the late, notorious "hanging judge," Thomas Keegan.

Williams' woeful tale reads like an Americanized version of a Russian novel -- a tome written in four full boxes of records concerning his arrest, interrogation, trial, incarceration and appeals.

Anthony Williams' best hope for relief came, and went, a few years ago, in 2004 and 2005, when minor "reforms" to New York's notorious "Rockefeller Drug Laws" provided him with zero relief.

Ironically, he was too small a fish in the ocean of the illicit drug trade to benefit from what have since proven to be anemic legislative charades. Most of the drug offenders who were re-sentenced and released under those incremental "reforms" had convictions for the possession or the sale of large quantities of illegal narcotics. But treacherous, counterintuitive twists in the "reform legislation" actually made it impossible for many low-level offenders to get retroactive relief. As a result, new provisions of the law did not apply in their particular cases -- which is why only a handful of offenders had their sentences reduced.

Worst of all, even when the supposed reforms might have applied, the legislation simultaneously enabled district attorneys to convince judges to interpret the new laws in such a way as to make an individual like Williams ineligible for resentencing. And guess what? That is exactly what Albany County District Attorney David Soares did to the long-suffering Williams. Not just once, but three times! Soares has behaved like a latter-day Inspector Javert of "Les Misérables." Adding insult to incarceration, Williams' mother had endorsed Soares in 2004 -- based on his campaign pledge to redefine the War on Drugs. She is perplexed today by Soares' vehement devotion to keeping her only child permanently locked up, as if he were a notorious war criminal. She has a point: her son has served 17 plus years; Albert Speer did 20 at Spandau.

Williams is by no means the only person entrapped in such a bizarre and unjust situation. The conveyor-belt of criminal justice continues to transfer scores of helpless addicts and dime-bag desperadoes - almost exclusively poor people of color -- from their communities into the madness of the state prison system.

Enough is enough.

It is beyond overdue for the Legislature and Governor to truly repeal the 36-year failed experiment in racism, injustice and government waste that the Rockefeller Drug Laws have foisted upon the people and taxpayers of New York. It is also time for these lawmakers to reconcile the chaotic discrepancies made in the specious photo-op revisions represented by the 2004-05 legislative "reforms."

If Albany leaders at last converge to exercise the overwhelming will of their constituencies, and do the right thing, to act like like statesmen rather than salesmen or brokers, then change worth having will surely come, and genuine justice will at long last follow.

Pastor Nazimova and other members of the Mothers of the New York Disappeared have met repeatedly with Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver. They also have met with Senator Malcolm Smith and Governor Paterson, when he was Senate Minority leader. Nazimova and the Mothers received solemn assurances from each of these "leaders" that they supported the repeal of the barbaric Rockefeller laws. Paterson also assured the heroic Argentine Madres de Plaza de Mayo that he was dedicated to repeal, during their historic visit to the state capitol and his office in April, 2004. I was present on all of these occasions.

The Williams family is also waiting for crucial, unconditional support from New York's popular and powerful Attorney General, Andrew Cuomo. Cuomo's comeback from his disastrous 2002 challenge to Carl McCall was premised on his pledge to "repeal" those atrocious drug laws. The massive exposure and good will he reaped from this noble cause resurrected Cuomo from a political graveyard into the state's highest legal office in 2006. However, Cuomo's early sincerity and support has slowly eroded, as witnessed by his current silence on Rockefeller repeal, among other civil rights issues.

For Anthony Williams' sake, and for the sake of thousands more Rockefeller "abductees," the solons of Albany could make history as giants of justice, rather than legislative Liliputians, when they reconvene this January.

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