



Posted on Wed, May. 19, 2010

## A second chance for juvenile offenders

Justice John Paul Stevens concisely summed up the reasoning behind the U.S. Supreme Court's 6-3 decision banning life sentences without parole for juvenile offenders convicted of nonhomicide violent crimes:

"Society changes. Knowledge accumulates. We learn, sometimes from our mistakes. Punishments that did not seem cruel and unusual at one time, may, in the light of reason and experience, be found cruel and unusual at a later time," he wrote, concurring with the majority opinion by Justice Anthony Kennedy.

Thanks to this humane, well-reasoned ruling, 129 U.S. juveniles sentenced to life without parole will get a chance to redeem themselves. Seventy-seven of them are in Florida, which has the highest number of such cases. The ruling centers on one of them in the case *Graham v. Florida*.

Jacksonville resident Terrance Graham, at 17, was on probation for a restaurant robbery, during which another man beat the manager, when he committed a home invasion. He was sentenced to life without parole for violating probation. Graham was no angel, but he surely didn't deserve a life sentence.

Graham and 76 other offenders can now appeal their sentences, with hopes of eventual release, instead of facing death in prison. They will have to show judges that they are rehabilitated and no longer a public menace.

In opposing the majority, Justice Clarence Thomas argued that in the 18th century someone as young as 7 could be sentenced to death in the United States. He argued that Graham's sentence would have been acceptable then and still should be now.

But the court majority got it right in noting that "evolving standards of decency" have influenced how the nation feels about punishment. This ruling follows others banning capital punishment for offenders who commit their crimes under age 18 and children and adults who are mentally retarded.

Research has shown that the brains of children have not fully evolved until their early to mid 20s. They have less understanding of the consequences of their actions than adults. In other words, with the right guidance, many "bad" kids can grow up to be law-abiding adults.

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