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'Thug' senator Alan Simpson condemns teen convicts' life sentence



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AT the end of a distinguished political career full of honour and achievement, Alan Simpson, the former senator from Wyoming, wants America to know that he was not always a pillar of the Republican establishment. A committee chairman, who nearly became a vice-presidential candidate, he was once a teenage thug.

Simpson's story of his violent youthful past will be told to the US Supreme Court this month as part of an unusual submission on behalf of two Florida convicts who are serving life in prison without parole.

Both were sentenced for crimes they committed as teenagers. America's highest court, which recently acquired a new member in Sonia Sotomayor, the Hispanic justice appointed by President Barack Obama, will next week consider defence claims that no teenager should be sentenced to effective "death by imprisonment", especially when their crimes do not include murder.

Defence lawyers argue that removing the prospect of parole for prisoners so young violates the constitution's ban on "cruel and unusual" punishment. They have recruited Simpson and several other high-profile former youth offenders in the hope of persuading the court that teenagers deserve a second chance.

The Supreme Court's rare decision to consider separate cases on the same issue reflects a slow and, many believe, long overdue reassessment of the uniquely American judicial policy of locking up teenagers and throwing away the key.

Joe Harris Sullivan was 13 when a Pensacola judge sentenced him to life without parole for raping a 72-year-old woman.

The judge described Sullivan as "beyond help" and declared that he would "send him away for as long as I can". He has already spent 20 years in jail.

Terrance Graham was 16 when he was arrested for armed burglary while on probation for a previous robbery.

At the time Florida was cracking down on repeat offenders and in 2005 a different judge declared Graham "incurable" and imposed the maximum sentence. More than 100 cases have been under the microscope since the Supreme Court ruled, after bitter internal debate in 2005, that juveniles should not be executed for murder.

Numerous legal and medical associations are supporting Sullivan and Graham on the grounds that the courts should not judge teenagers in the same way as they judge adults, just as governments recognise the difference by placing certain restrictions on juvenile drinking, voting and marrying.

Yet the most poignant testimony is likely to come from Simpson and other former offenders, most of whom went to prison but emerged to rebuild responsible lives.

Others include Charles Dutton, an Emmy-winning black actor and director who was convicted of manslaughter and discovered acting after reading a book of plays in prison, and Luis Rodriguez, a former Los Angeles gang member who is now an acclaimed poet.

The most surprising of the bunch is Simpson, whose father was a Republican senator too; he frankly admits of his wayward youth: "I was a monster."

In his submission to the court, Simpson describes how he and some friends set fire to a federal building; played a gun game with friends to see how close they could fire without hitting someone; went on shooting sprees, blasting away at mailboxes and killing a cow; and finally punched a police officer, who arrested him and threw him in jail.

With the help of his probation officer, Simpson redeemed himself and ultimately served 17 years in the US Senate.

The Supreme Court may decide that 13 is too young for a maximum sentence, but that 17 is not. For Sullivan and Graham, the ruling will in effect decide whether they die in jail.

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