

May 6, 2016

Senator Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Congressman Paul Ryan  
Speaker of the House  
1233 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Harry Reid  
Minority Leader  
522 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi  
Minority Leader  
233 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Mitch McConnell, Senator Harry Reid, Congressman Paul Ryan and  
Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi,

My name is Alton Mills. In 1994, I was sentenced to die in prison. I was 24 years old. I was a high school graduate from a two-parent family who grew up on Chicago's Southside. My mother was a nurse. My father worked for 40 years at a local grocery store before he retired. By my early 20's, I fell in with the wrong crowd. For two years, I worked as a drug runner and delivered crack cocaine and money for the drug ring's leader. I tried to make ends meet by working as a drug courier, earning only \$300 a week.

There are four days in my life that are the most important to my eventual life sentence: on two of those days, I got state probation for possessing less than 5 grams of crack. On another day, I was arrested, taken to federal court and told that prosecutors used my two probation sentences for crack possession to seek a mandatory life sentence against me. On my last day in federal court, I stood before the judge who reluctantly sentenced me to life. The judge told me my life sentence was "farcical" and "cruel and unusual," but his hands were tied and there was nothing he could do. I ask – should a person who never spent a day behind bars be sentenced to life in prison for being a low-level drug runner?

As you likely already know, a first time non-violent drug offender tried in federal court could face a hefty mandatory minimum sentence of ten years in prison. If that person has a prior drug conviction and the prosecutor files a single sheet of paper called a "Section 851 Enhancement" the sentence will double from ten to twenty years. Worse yet, as happened to me, if that person has two prior drug convictions – even for simple possession of a very small amount of drugs – and the prosecutor files an 851 enhancement, the sentence jumps from 10 years to *life in prison*. There is no parole in the federal system, so a person with a life sentence will ultimately die in prison. The 851 enhancement gives prosecutors – not judges – the sole power to decide whether or not someone will live or be condemned to die in prison. The 851 enhancement also gives prosecutors – not judges – the sole power to decide whether America will spend hundreds of

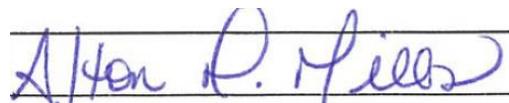
thousands of dollars to lock someone like me up for the rest of their life. For me, the prosecutor made that very harsh, expensive and unreviewable decision on the very same day I was arrested.

I understand that harsh drug laws were supposed to keep violent and serious repeat drug dealers off the streets. That did not happen in my case. I am not a violent person or serious repeat drug offender. I am not a super-predator. At my sentencing, even the prosecutor said “the thrust of the evidence against Mills was that Mills did whatever [the ring’s leader] told him to do.” What is even more ironic – I was the only one serving a life sentence. The drug kingpins who testified against me only spent ten years in prison and were released over a decade ago. The drug ring’s leader will be released in three years, as will the group’s second in command. I was the least responsible person in the group, yet the one sentenced to the longest, harshest prison term. Was America safer with me locked away while the kingpins and ringleaders were released over a decade ago?

Despite my life sentence, I matured and bettered myself in prison. I tried to enroll in college classes, but was denied and told the college classes were for people who would eventually be released. I still did not give up. I took numerous prison classes to build my professional and educational skills. I am overjoyed that after 22 years in prison, I was granted clemency, but am frustrated that there are so many others like me who languish unfairly in prison. When I left prison, I left behind so many redeemable people.

I am excited that legislation has been introduced by bipartisan leaders to help others like me facing life sentences for low-level drug offenses. Under this legislation, I could have asked the judge to consider my hard work in prison and reduce my life sentence down to 25 years. A sentence of 25 years is still a very long time – but hope for a second chance would mean so much to so many men and women still locked away. Although receiving clemency is incredible, legislative reform is critical because it will impact far greater numbers of worthy people.

When I was arrested, I was a young father raising a 19-month old daughter. Next year, I will watch my daughter walk across the stage at her college graduation. If it were not for the commutation of my sentence by President Obama last year, I would ultimately die in prison for mistakes I made as a very impressionable young man. I am someone who would benefit from legislative sentencing reform had my sentence not been commuted. There are many like me who deserve to ask a judge for a second chance too.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alton D. Mills". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Alton D. Mills