

Why has Javier been nominated?

Child Rights Hero Nominee • Pages 52–71

Javier Stauring

Javier Stauring has been nominated for the 2015 World's Children's Prize for his 20-year struggle for children who have been imprisoned, survivors of violence, and their families.

Javier wants to bring justice through reconciliation and dialogue, instead of through punishment and revenge. Javier does everything from visiting children in prison to supporting victims of crime and influencing politicians and other decision makers to make the criminal justice system more child-friendly. Javier's work has helped change laws and regulations, helping imprisoned children and victims of crime in the process. He helps leaders from all different faiths, from Christians and Muslims to Buddhists, to work together for the rights of the child alongside children themselves. Javier's work has had an impact in lots of ways, from making it possible for grandparents to visit their imprisoned grandchildren to the creation of new, child-friendly laws that give children who have been sentenced to die in prison the chance of one day being set free.

The names of some of the people in the stories about Javier have been changed.



Javier Stauring was shocked the first time he visited a children's unit at Los Angeles Central Jail. He found 14-year-olds in isolation in dark cells, almost 24 hours a day, for months at a time. Javier protested, but it wasn't until two of the children tried to take their own lives that he was able to get the world around him to react.

It all started with politicians in California deciding that children who were suspected of serious crimes, such as armed robbery or attempted murder, had lost their right to be treated as children. Instead, they should be sent to an adult court and given sentences as tough as adults. The politicians introduced laws that meant that more children could be sentenced to life in prison, even if they were as young as 14.

Many adults said, "If the kids are old enough to do the crime, they're old enough to do the time."

Javier also believed that children who committed serious crimes should be in the care of society until they were no longer a threat to other people or themselves. But at the same time, he was sure that with the right help, children could change. He had worked for many years as a visiting chaplain, a kind of

counselor. Javier listened to the children who were incarcerated in prison or youth detention centers, and talked about taking responsibility for their actions, and choosing a life without violence and crime. Almost all those he met had been subjected to violence and abuse throughout their childhoods. Javier's belief was that they needed support, not punishment.

But the politicians had the opposite view. They said, 'Lock 'em up and throw away the key' and blamed their attitudes on their voters' fears of violent children. Newspapers and TV news had long been aware that they gained more readers and viewers when they reported on children and terrible crimes. People found it exciting but also

Many adults say, "If the kids are old enough to do the crime, they're old enough to do the time".



frightening. They felt safer when the politicians promised to lock the children up for ever.

Prison instead of school

In the early 2000s, there were tens of thousands of children locked up in youth detention centers ('prisons' for chil-

dren) in California, and hundreds of children had been sentenced to life in prison with no chance of release. For 20 years, all new laws regarding children and crime had moved towards tougher sentences. Millions of dollars were invested in building more and larger prisons –

much more than what went to schools and crime prevention programs. At the same time, schools started to call in the police for behaviour that used to be dealt with through detention. Instead of contacting the parents, schools started calling the police when students skipped school or

tagged the walls. Poor families were handed large fines, and youth detention centers became overcrowded. A high-ranking judge told Javier, "I have to go by the law, but what is happening is wrong. We punish kids for being kids, and give them no chance to grow out of it."



Colour matters

In the USA, the risk of being arrested and imprisoned is much higher if you are black (African American) or Latino (with roots in Central or South America), or if you are American Indian/Native /Indigenous American. It's much easier for white children to avoid arrest and conviction than children of other ethnic backgrounds, even if they have committed the same crimes. This is the case for everything from skipping school and graffiti, to violent crime. The risk is the highest for black children, who are nine times more likely to be sent to prison than white children who commit the same crimes, while Latino children are four times more likely to be imprisoned.





Solitary confinement

One day Javier went to visit Maria, a teenage girl he had got to know at a youth detention center. She had gone with her adult sister, who used a screwdriver to threaten a woman for money. Maria had now been moved to an adult prison. Javier was curious, because neither he nor other advocates knew how children were treated there.

A guard took Javier through the long corridors and down lots of stairs to the solitary confinement unit. This unit, or 'the hole', was known to be the worst place in the whole prison. Only the most dangerous prisoners were brought here, as punishment if they had done something like attacking another prisoner or a guard. Javier was confused. What had Maria done to be brought here?

The guard stopped beside a long row of metal doors, and pointed to one of them. Javier peered through a small hole in the door and saw Maria, curled up on a bunk, right next to the stainless steel sink and toilet. Javier called to her. She got up slowly and stumbled over to the door, stick-thin and pale as a sheet, with her long hair hanging unkempt.

"Why am I here?" she asked in a hoarse voice. "I'm cold."

Nightmare in the dark

Maria had no blanket in the cell, just a thin plastic mattress. The prisoners in 'the hole' were often so lonely and desperate they wanted to die. That's why they were not allowed bedclothes – in case they used them to hang themselves. Maria spoke to Javier through the food slot in the door. She had been brought straight from the youth detention center to the dark, windowless cell, early one morning. The only light came from the corridor, through the hole in the door.

"I asked the guards why they didn't turn on the lights during the day. They said, 'This is the hole. We never turn the lights on here.'"

Maria wasn't allowed to leave the cell for over a month, not even to take a shower or call her mother.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind," said Maria. It scared her when the adults in the other cells screamed and fought. One prisoner had stuck an arm through the hole in the door to try to touch her. Another often told her about how she had killed her own children.

"We'll do whatever it takes to get you out of here," said Javier.



While Maria was in juvenile hall, she was able to go to school and, like these girls, allowed to attend Sunday services.

Demands for change

Javier protested to the prison management, but they said they had to keep Maria in isolation. In an adult unit she could be abused, even raped. Javier got hold of a lawyer who promised to try to help Maria. Then he also demanded to visit the boys, who were being held in a different part of the prison. There were so many of them that the prison had created a special child unit with around 40 windowless isolation cells. The boys were kept locked up for at least 23 hours a day, and were only allowed to come out to

shower and call home from time to time. For a total of three hours a week they were permitted to walk around in a small cage on the roof, one at a time, to get some daylight and exercise. Now and again a teacher appeared and stuck some worksheets through the bars.

Javier and many others – prison chaplains, youth organisations, judges and lawyers – protested against this inhumane treatment. The lawyer who helped Maria eventually managed to get her moved back to the youth detention center. But the boys



"Hands behind your back", the staff tell the children.



Adam, 12, misses his family.

What happened to Maria?

Maria wasn't used to daylight when she was moved back to the youth detention center. When the bus drove out the prison and the sun shone

through the windows, she got a nosebleed. Maria felt dizzy, and her eyes ached. For a long time she had to stay in the detention center care unit. Seven months later, she was released and her mother picked her up. "I rode on the floor of the van and told my mom to check her rear view mirror. I said: 'Mom, look back, they're gonna come and get me.' It was very hard getting used to people. And still, years later, I have a problem with cramped spaces."

Maria graduated from high school and Javier helped her get her gang tattoos removed. Today she works at a restaurant and she is involved in the 'Baby Elmo' project, which helps incarcerated teenage parents learn to take responsibility for their children.

"I go and talk to the mothers and tell them that we have to break the cycle. Nothing is more important than education. I have two children and my biggest fear is that they make a mistake like I did. My kids are not going to be in the street life, they are going to school."

It was through a food slot in a cell door like this one that Javier talked with Maria in jail.

PHOTO/PINELLAS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE/AP

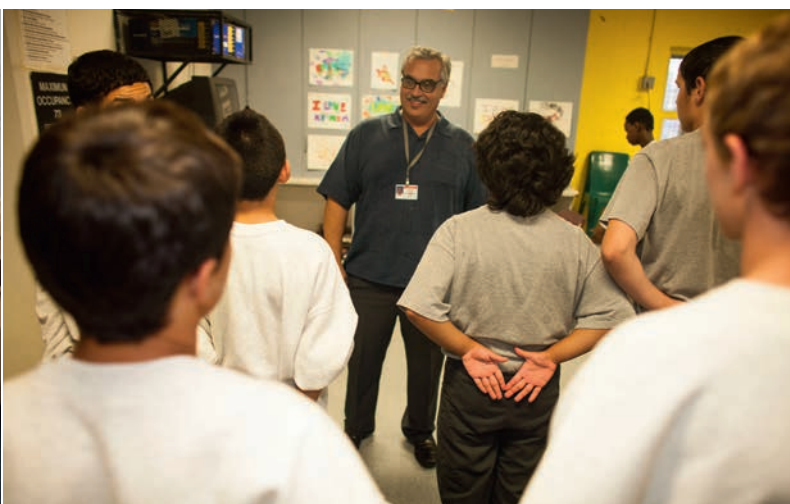
remained in the prison, and Javier watched as they became thinner, paler, and quieter. He tried to get the biggest newspaper in LA to write about it, but they didn't think their readers were interested in children who had committed crimes. Months turned to years. And one day, the unthinkable hap-

pened. Two 14-year-old boys tried to hang themselves in their cells, but were rescued just in time.

Javier had had enough. He called a press conference right outside the prison, and now, at last, the journalists came.

"What is being done to children in this jail is sinful," said Javier. The next day the

prison staff called him and said, "You're not welcome here any more". They were angry because Javier had promised not to tell anyone what went on in the prison. But Javier had got permission from the children and their parents. He sued the prison for violating his right to free speech.



Javier is energized by talking with children.



Javier had to fight hard to be allowed to visit children in jail again. Photo: Genaro Molina.





How Javier works

Javier works with many others – advocates, organisations and authorities – and has done things like:

- Developing programs that give incarcerated children access to education, support, culture and sport, which can help them create a better life.
- Developing programs where relatives of victims of crime can meet with incarcerated young people and support one another, allowing them to move on with their lives through healing dialogue instead of punishment and revenge.
- Giving incarcerated children the chance to get visits from their grandparents (not just from their parents, as used to be the case) and increasing the number of visiting days.
- Getting new laws passed that help young people serving life sentences, and that protect children and young people from violence and abuse when they are incarcerated along with adults.
- Protesting to stop solitary confinement and inhumane treatment of incarcerated children.
- Giving faith leaders the opportunity to work together for change alongside incarcerated children, victims of crime, schools, universities and organisations.

➡ After two years, Javier’s case was upheld in court. The prison changed their rules and allowed him to visit the children again. Shortly thereafter the boys unit was closed down, and a decision was made that nobody should be moved to an adult prison until they are adults.

Always the outsider

Javier was born in Los Angeles, but moved to Mexico when he was nine. Soon after that his father died, and Javier felt like an outsider in his new country. He was the American, the ‘gringo’, who didn’t speak good Spanish. Everyone else at school had a dad at home. During his teenage years, Javier started hanging out with older boys who started fights in town to prove how tough they were. When he was 19, his family moved back to Los Angeles.

“Suddenly I was a Mexican immigrant in the US,” says

Javier today. “I always felt like an outsider. I think that’s why I could understand the children in jail. When they told me about feeling alone and vulnerable, I realised they weren’t so different from how I was as a child.”

Javier’s mother was the one who thought he should visit kids in prison. She was a volunteer at her church and thought some voluntary work would do Javier good. At the time he was working as a salesman in the jewelry business.

“It didn’t make much sense to me,” says Javier. “Giving up my weekends to go to jail when I could be at the beach or watching football on TV. And I was scared. I had seen those kids on the news, gang members killing innocent folks.”

Eye-opener

Javier was nervous before his first visit, but soon he was vis-

iting the kids several times a week.

“The real eye-opener was accompanying kids to court. I had gotten to know them and their stories of loss and pain. To sit next to them when they got 75 years in prison was shocking. I felt I owed it to them to fight for their rights.”

A few years later, Javier quit his well-paid job.

“It didn’t work, first meeting with other jewelry dealers who would complain about not making enough million dollars in sales. Later in the evening I would try to comfort a 14-year-old who had just found out he would spend the rest of his life in prison. I felt I had to use my time and energy on what felt meaningful.”

These days, Javier is the Co-Director of the Office of Restorative Justice, a part of the Catholic Archdiocese in Los Angeles. *Restorative justice* means trying to create



A sign outside a youth prison warns that the area is patrolled by guards with dogs.



justice by ‘repairing’ the damage done using methods other than punishment, such as dialogue, education, and community service. “It is important to reach out to everybody who is impacted by crime,” explains Javier.

“One of our most important activities is to organize healing dialogues with family members of victims of violent crime and of incarcerated youth. We have groups where mothers whose children have been locked up for life sit with mothers who’ve had children murdered. They have all lost their children, and when they share their stories and pain they can understand and console each other. It is very powerful and healing.”

Since Javier became a director, he has to attend a lot of meetings, meet with politicians and academics, and do lots of paperwork. But he will never stop visiting incarcerated children. He is grateful for

Javier and a child in jail greet each other with "fist bumps".

his wife and three children, who support him even though their father often spends his evenings and weekends in jail.

“It is the the relationships with the incarcerated children and their families that keep me going, it fuels everything I do. They need to know that I and many others fight for them and a better future. That they are not forgotten.” 🌐



Arguments that work

In order to sway politicians and their voters, Javier and his colleagues use both economic and scientific arguments. For example, the latest neurological research shows that our brains are not fully grown until we are around 25. Teenagers behave in a different way from adults, because their brains work differently. This is particularly true of the parts of the brain that govern feelings, impulses, and the capacity to plan and think forward. But the thing that have really convinced politicians is that they can save hundreds of millions of dollars by not locking up so many children. Since 1990, California has spent between 66 and 83 million dollars on imprisoning people who have been sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole, for crimes committed as children. For them to remain in jail until they die will cost around half a billion dollars.

Learn more on next page!





Give kids the chance

of a second chance

In California, over 300 young people have been imprisoned on life sentences with no chance of release, for crimes committed when they were children. Around one million children are in prison all over the world, but the USA is the only country that sentences children to stay in prison until they die.

It is a sentence made for the worst of the worst, those that do not seem as if they could ever change," says Javier. "But children are different from adults, they grow up and mature. The law must take this into account."

Javier and human rights lawyer Elizabeth Calvin started a campaign with other advocates, to give kids the chance of a second chance.

"We didn't say that anyone who had been sentenced for a serious crime should simply be let out. All we wanted was for them to have a chance to show that they had changed after, say, a number of years. If they were no longer a

threat to society, they would be released."

Everyone got involved

Lots of people got involved in the campaign. Children who had been in prison, victims of crime and their families got to go on courses to learn how to talk to legislators and the media. Then they held press conferences, wrote letters, and called and visited anyone who could influence the situation. One father said, "I want my son's murderer to be punished, but I also want that person to have the chance to change."

Former police officers, prison governors and prose-

cutors also got behind the campaign. Usually these people would support tougher sentences. But many of them had seen with their own eyes how young people could change as they grew older. That's why they believed children deserved another chance.

Long struggle

Javier invited leaders from churches, temples and mosques to visit the children. Many were unsure, but they soon changed their minds. A presiding elder of a church said, "I marched with Martin Luther King, I've been around the world, I've shaken

Children from organisations in Javier's network, like these members of the Youth Justice Coalition, campaign against life sentences for children.

Photo: Youth Justice Coalition

hands with many presidents. I've never been as touched as I was sitting down with these kids." A Jesuit priest said, "Jesus wouldn't throw away these kids. He wouldn't say that they're worthless."

It took years, but today, after many setbacks, there are several new laws in California that help these children. One of these, from 2014, gives those who were sentenced to life in prison the chance to apply for release (on parole) after 25 years in prison, and the chance of a better life. 🌐

24 hours in a children's 'jail'

In a special unit at a youth detention center in California, around 40 boys are housed in one-man cells. Security is at a maximum, with bullet-proof glass, heavy gates and sensor fences with barbed wire. A few of the boys await trial, others have already been given long sentences.



06.15. Wake up

Peter, 16, rushes to the bathroom.

"Our cells are always locked. If we need to go to the bathroom we have to get the staff's attention. It makes you feel like a dog. Sometimes I just don't want to ask for help, so I pee on my towel."

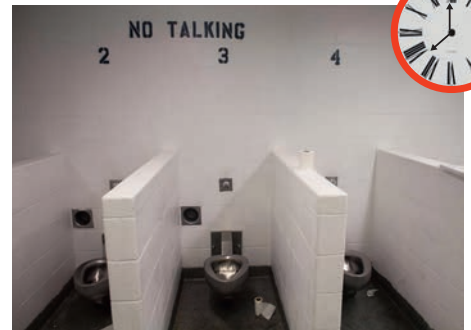


10.00 Surveillance

The staff in the control room keep an eye on everyone and everything.

04.00. Transportation

Marcus, 15, is going to court. He wears a special transportation jumpsuit and his hands and feet are shackled. Soon he will be placed in a small cage inside the bus that will take him to the court-house.



07.30 Grooming

The bathroom has clear glass windows and low walls between the toilets. The prisoners get three minutes each in the shower.

"Once a week they give us a package with clean clothes and a towel. The worst thing is not having your own underwear," says Tomas, 16. He puts his trousers under his mattress to keep them creased.

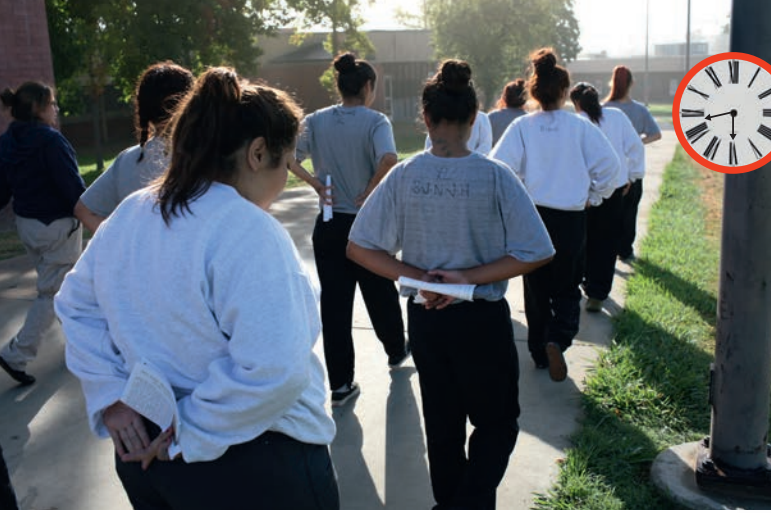


08.00 Perfect order

Eric, 17, makes his bed.

"It has to be perfect or we have to do it over."





08.30. School or Service

When they go to school or a church service, the young people keep their hands behind their backs, to reduce the risk of contact or fights. Girls and boys are kept in different sections of the detention center.

12.00 Lunch

There is a large room that gets used as a dining hall and a room for other activities. The chairs and tables are fixed to the floor. Sometimes people break down, for example people who have just been given life sentences, and try to throw furniture around. That isn't possible here.



13.00 Class or visiting

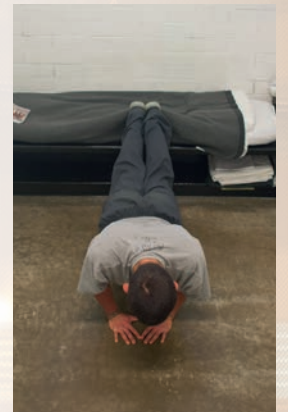
There are visiting times at the weekend. It used to be that only the parents were allowed to visit their kids, one day a week. Javier and his team have managed to get grandparents in too, and increase the visiting times to two days a week.



15.30 Recreation

"We have one hour of 'rec' per day. It's nice to get out in the sun," says James, 15.

Many of the kids train hard in their cells. "We better build our strength before we are moved to state prison (with adults). Anything can happen in there, I need to be able to protect myself," says one boy. The cells are 3.5 x 3 metres. Prisoners are only allowed a handful of personal belongings, like books and letters, and a maximum of five photos.



Some of the kids hardly ever get visitors.

"My son is too little to visit", says Daniel, 17, who is sentenced to life in prison, plus 30 years. "When he gets older I will tell him not to follow in my footsteps. To be on his own and think before he does something stupid. I did everything to fit in: I only cared about showing 'chismo' for the neighborhood. The drugs, crystal meth, turned me into a disgusting, pathetic person. Looking back at how I was, I'm so disappointed in myself. I finally got the strength to take off my mask, but it is too late now."



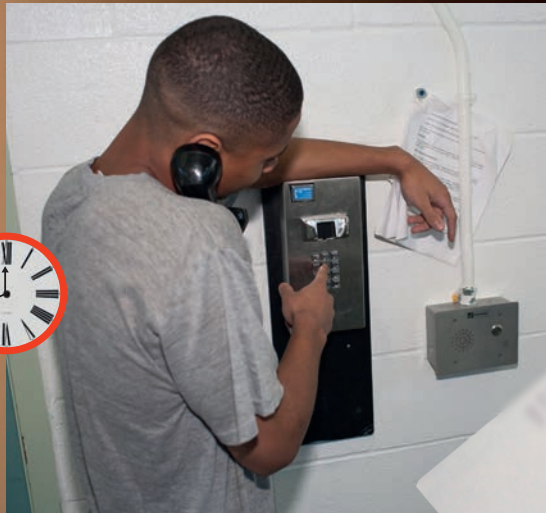
18.00 Javier visits

After dinner, Javier and Father Mike, the prison chaplain, come to support the boys and talk with them about life and the future. Eric, 17, is going to court tomorrow and is scared. His friends try to comfort him.



20.00 Calling home

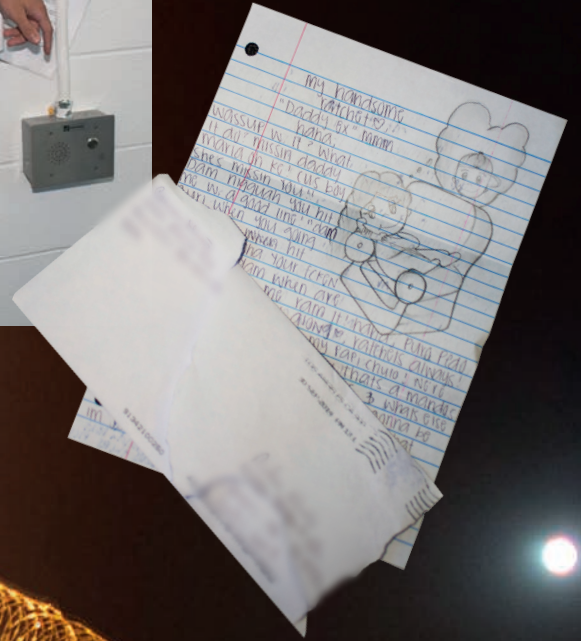
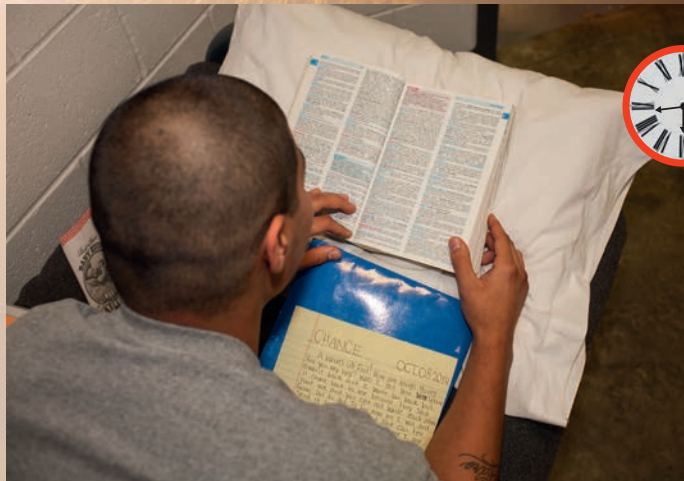
The boys cannot receive calls. They have to use a payphone and call collect. This can be expensive for their families. A lot of kids want to use the phone, so everyone's time to talk is limited. There is no access to computers or email. Letters to and from family and friends are opened and checked by the staff.



20.30 Locked up

Michael is one of the few who have been given a second chance. Instead of life in prison, he will soon be released and go to boarding school, far from the gangs and drugs.

"It gives the other guys hope," he says.



Joseph, 17 has received flowers from his parents, and he uses his last half hour of light creating a work of art in his cell.



21.00 Lights out

Now the doors are locked until tomorrow. Eric is afraid. He prays about tomorrow's trial, that he won't receive a life sentence. Then he lies awake in the dark for a long time.



More than three



David has a young daughter who he has hardly ever seen. "Her mother doesn't want us to have any contact, but I draw her stuff and send it anyway."

David was 16 when one of his gang friends shot at two guys on the street. Nobody was badly injured, and David wasn't the one holding the weapon. Still, he was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to life in jail, with no chance of freedom, ever.

David and his three younger siblings were raised by their aunt. Their father was in and out of prison, but their mother came to visit sometimes. One day she took David's younger siblings and disappeared. David was left behind, alone. At night he often lay awake thinking, 'Why doesn't she want me?' He tried to make up all kinds of reasons, but nothing felt right. David's cousins teased him because he didn't have any parents. When he was seven, he asked his aunt why he couldn't live with his mother.

"Times are tough," she replied.

A few years later, when David was eleven, his mother came back and took him to Mexico. But she abandoned him again there. His father was hardly ever out of prison long enough for them to meet. David got used to the fact that his parents couldn't take care of him.

A new family

David lived in the middle of a poor, dangerous area. His uncle was a gang member and David looked up to him. He

also admired the gang's style and their strong sense of unity. When he was thirteen, David asked if he could join the gang.

"No, school is more important," said his uncle. The other gang members thought he was too young as well. But David dropped out of school, and was finally allowed to be



life sentences

‘jumped’ into the gang. That meant that he had to let two gang members beat him up badly for a few minutes. Then they gave him a gun and told him to be ‘ready for whatever’.

David’s uncle was upset.

“If you stay on this path you will end up in prison or dead.”

That same year, one of David’s old classmates was shot to death in a gang fight. But by then he had started taking so many drugs that he couldn’t feel fear or sadness.

The beginning of the end

The gang became the family that David had never had. When he wasn’t working with his uncle, who was a construction worker, he would hang out with his new

friends day and night. One morning, they got into a fight with some boys from another area. One of the older gang members decided they should go back to David’s and get his gun.

“This feels like a bad idea. Let’s not do this,” said David as he handed over the weapon. He was right. Not long after, his friend shot at the two boys and hit one of them. David was standing beside him and saw the boy fall. Later that day, he was arrested by the police.

Trial begins

The boy who got shot only sustained a minor injury, and he was able to leave hospital the same day. But the shooting was still considered an

attempted murder, and it was decided that David should be tried in an adult court, although he was only sixteen. The prosecutor offered him a deal:

“If you agree to a life sentence you don’t have to go to trial, and have the chance of getting out on parole after 25 years.”

But David said no. He didn’t know much about the law, but he hadn’t shot anyone, so why should he go to jail for 25 years?

David was held at the youth detention center for seven months, until the first day of his trial. At four in the morning, the youth detention center bus took him to court, shackled hand and foot. The defence lawyer gave him a



David, 22

Lives: In Calipatria Prison.

Likes: Drawing, writing poetry, playing football.

Sad: When I think about my family, and how my life could have been.

Misses: My daughter.

Dreams of: Being free.



→ suit to wear and told him to hide his gang tattoo. When David entered the court, he looked so young and thin that the jury, twelve men and women of different ages, seemed to feel sorry for him. But the prosecutor said:

“This little kid is not as innocent as he looks.”

Then he showed old police pictures of David and his tattoos. A gang expert testified and described David as one of the worst of the worst.

The jury's decision

The trial lasted for a week and a half. Then the jury retired to deliberate. David waited alone in a small, cold, dirty cell. He shut his eyes tightly and said to himself:

“Be ready. This will be bad.”

After an hour the jury came back. David was brought back into the courtroom and saw his aunt, his mother and his girlfriend sitting there.

“I love you guys,” he said, before a guard handcuffed him to the chair.

One of the members of the jury stood up and read from a piece of paper: ‘Guilty’. David felt his insides turn to ice, even though he had been expecting it. The judge looked at him and asked if she should feel bad for giving him a harsh sentence.

“You are so charming, and look so young and innocent. . . You look like a little angel.”

Her nice words confused David. She paused and continued:

“But that’s what scares me.”

Tough sentence

The judge said that David would never get the chance to commit another crime. He was sentenced to three life sentences plus 20 years, with no chance of release. The sentence was automatically tougher because he was a member of a gang.

David started to cry as he was led back to his cell. One of the guards, a big man with spiky hair, gave him two bits of chewing gum and said:

“Don’t pay attention to her. You know who you are. And maybe you’ll get it overturned.”

There were only two buses a day between the youth detention center and the court, so David had to wait for hours in the cell. He tried to sleep on the concrete bunk, but it was too cold. His defence lawyer came by briefly. He was annoyed.

“I told you to take the prosecutor’s deal,” he said.

When David got back to the youth detention center around midnight, everyone knew what had happened. The staff had put a note on

his cell door to check on him every half hour, to make sure he didn’t take his own life.

No visitors

When David turned eighteen the youth detention center organised a farewell party. Then he was moved to one of California’s infamous adult prisons.

“I was really scared,” he says now. “But I shared a cell with an older guy who tried to calm me down. He said, ‘You’re a youngster, your gang will look out for you. Just stay away from drugs, gambling and fights.’”

Just a few weeks later, the prison was rocked by violent rioting between different gangs. Many were stabbed and beaten with weapons that had been smuggled in or made in prison. Both prisoners and guards were injured. Although most of the prisoners were not involved, all the inmates were punished by having visits and phone calls withdrawn for a year. David and the other prisoners were hardly ever allowed to leave their cells.





"If I ever get out of here I want to work with kids, and help them make better decisions than I did."

"The guards called us 'ghosts' because we all turned so white in there, without any sunlight."

Farewell to the gang

David has been sentenced to stay in prison until he dies. He hopes that the new laws that Javier has told him about might give him a chance to get out in 20 or 30 years. But for that to happen, he has to stay out of trouble. That's why he has just moved to another part of the prison,

for people who want to break free of the gang world. It was a really tough decision.

"My gang was my family for a very long time, and they looked out for me inside. But I was so tired of wearing a mask all the time. There was at least one stabbing every week. I didn't like to see people hurt, and I didn't want to hurt anyone. I want to live and maybe have a chance to meet my daughter one day. Even if it means breaking that bond with the gang." 🌐



David hardly ever gets any visitors. All his relatives have moved back to Mexico. But Javier comes to visit, and that means a lot.

"I never had a father, so Javier filled that spot. At first I was suspicious, but he didn't give up on me. He kept in contact. He tells me things I never heard before. He gives me hope and has expectations of me that I don't even have for myself. Javier makes me feel that I have not been forgotten."



Michael was 15 when he was arrested by the police for five attempted murders. He was sentenced to life in prison and will remain locked up behind high walls and electric fences for the rest of his life.

Sentenced to die in prison

I was raised in poverty like many kids in my circumstances. My mom was an alcoholic and my father was an abusive drug addict. But my dad went away and eventually me and my siblings were taken away by CPSI (Child Protective Services) and placed in foster care. My grandmother took us in before they separated us in to different homes. My mom wanted to take us all back but my grandma only let her take me and my little brother.

Stole to eat

We went with my mother to live in absolute poverty in a ghetto, a gang and drug infested neighborhood. We lived in a trailer that had no windows, just clear bags to make it look like windows. The roof and floor were cav-

ing in, and the doors had no handles because they'd get kicked in by the cops anyway.

My mother would leave me and my little brother by ourselves for weeks at a time. Our main source of food was going to school to get the free breakfast and lunch. On the weekends I'd take my brother to the park where they gave meals to the homeless every Sunday. Eventually I had to start stealing to take care of us, to get clothes and food.

My mom started staying home more often when I was about 10 years old. She didn't like that I was stealing to put food on the table. So she would kick me out. From then on I lived mainly on the streets.

Learnt to survive

I got jumped into the gang at the age of eleven. The gang taught me how to make money by robbery and selling drugs. We had enemies who wanted to kill me or someone I loved. I learned to hate them so much I lost sight of who I was. I didn't care about money anymore. I just wanted to hurt them as much as I could for every time they jumped me or shot at me or killed people who were close to me.

I started using heavy drugs like crack and meth. I became what people called a crack-head at the age of eleven. My mom wouldn't take me in, so I slept in bushes, under bridg-

Michael was twelve when he was arrested for the first time. When he was taken from Juvenile Hall to court he had to put on an orange overall. Handcuffs and ankle shackles were attached to a chain around his waist. "It's hard to walk, you have to shuffle forward," he explains.



Michael, 20, has been in prison for five years.



es and in park restrooms. My homies wouldn't take me in either but they'd give me a gun and tell me to take care of myself.

Arrested for the first time

I lived on the streets till the age of twelve. Then, someone tried to shoot me from a car but I fired first and saved my own life. I was caught but only charged with discharg-

ing a firearm at a moving vehicle.

After a short time inside, I was let out. My mom didn't want me staying at her house so I was soon back in the hood, with my gang. I went out 10 times worse, because I had seen jail and was no longer scared of it. I had a new outlook on life. I thought that if I can hurt as many enemies as I can, I could prevent

them from hurting me or one of mine the next day. So I continued to inflict as much damage as I could. I lost contact with who I really was. Just a twelve-year-old kid.

War on the streets

My parole officer was meant to keep an eye on me after I was released. He sent me to a group home because I was running the streets. I was in



Did you know?

- That out of all those serving life for murders committed when they were children, almost half were not physically involved – for example, by firing a weapon. Some were standing alongside the person responsible. Others were look-outs, for example, outside a shop, while their friends carried out an armed robbery.
- That in cases where the child had an adult crime partner, the adult received a *shorter* sentence than the child in more than half of cases.
- That 85 percent of people in California who have been sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes committed when they were children, are black (African American) or Latino (with roots in South America).

What are the gangs like?

Michael joined a gang in Los Angeles (LA) when he was eleven. Gangs have existed in LA since the 1940s. It all started with groups of white racists who went to Mexican American areas and attacked young people there. The police didn't do anything about it, so lots of young Latinos joined with their friends to defend one another and their neighbourhood. Gradually, some of the gangs of friends started to fight with one another, about which neighbourhood was best and who was the strongest. Some developed into criminal gangs, who fought over who


was allowed to sell drugs in particular areas. In the 1980s many gangs started using more weapons and selling more dangerous drugs. In recent years crime has decreased, but there are still hundreds of gangs all over LA, from all different ethnic groups. Many children who grow up in gang neighbourhoods often feel forced to join, to gain friends and protection. Once you have joined, it's hard to leave without being punished. Many high-ranking gang leaders have been sentenced to life in prison, but continue to run their gangs from inside.





Children locked up with adults

In the USA, around 250,000 children are tried as adults every year, instead of having their cases heard in a child and youth court. Every night, 10,000 children spend the night in an adult jail. Many of them have not even been tried, but are just *suspected* of a crime. Still, they are put in great danger and run a much higher risk of being subjected to abuse and sexual violence than adults in the same prisons. There is also a higher risk that these children will be affected by depression and attempt suicide than the adults.



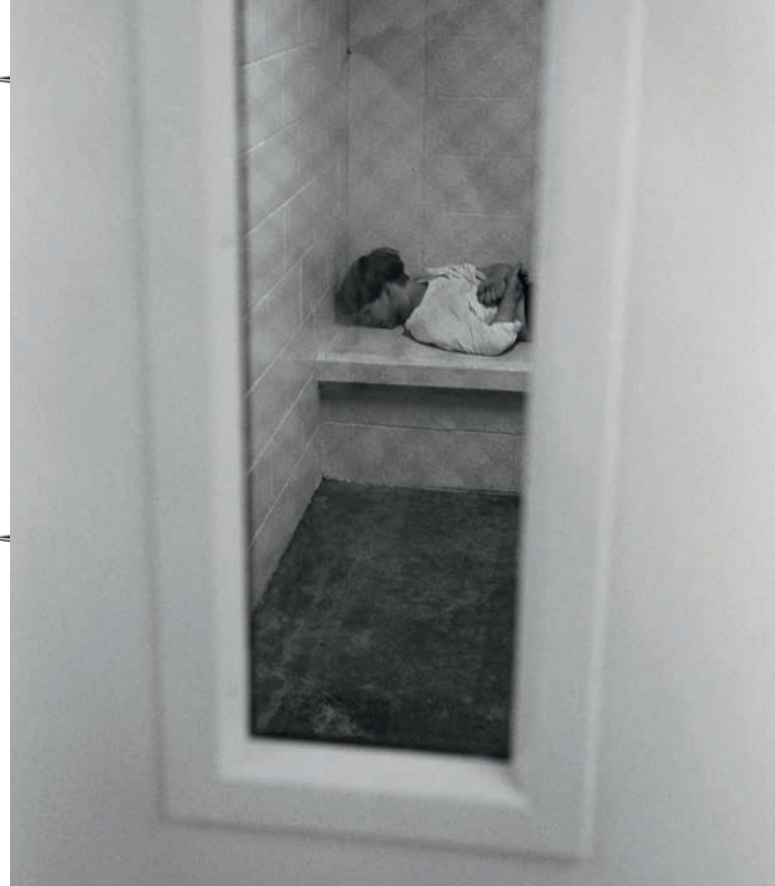
→ the group home system for two years before I ran away and started selling a lot of drugs.

The streets were at war at the time, absolutely vicious. Innocent people are shot or killed at times. The nights are the worst, but violence can happen at any time of day. It makes you feel paranoid, like someone is always following you around. I didn't even feel safe walking to the store without a gun.

I was arrested by the police for selling drugs and carrying a gun. I went to Juvenile Camp for six months, where I ran into guys from other gangs who had shot at me and who I had shot at. We fought

every time we saw each other – like animals tearing at each other's throats, never realising that we were basically each other's mirror images. We'd grown up in the same circumstances, but hated each other because he lived three blocks from me.

They released me at the age of 14. I had nothing, so I started selling drugs again within two weeks and my mom kicked me out again. I had sunk so low, I was in a deep dark place where I didn't care about life, not mine or anybody else's. I found release for my anger and frustration through hurting others. So many nights I slept under that bridge. I cried to myself



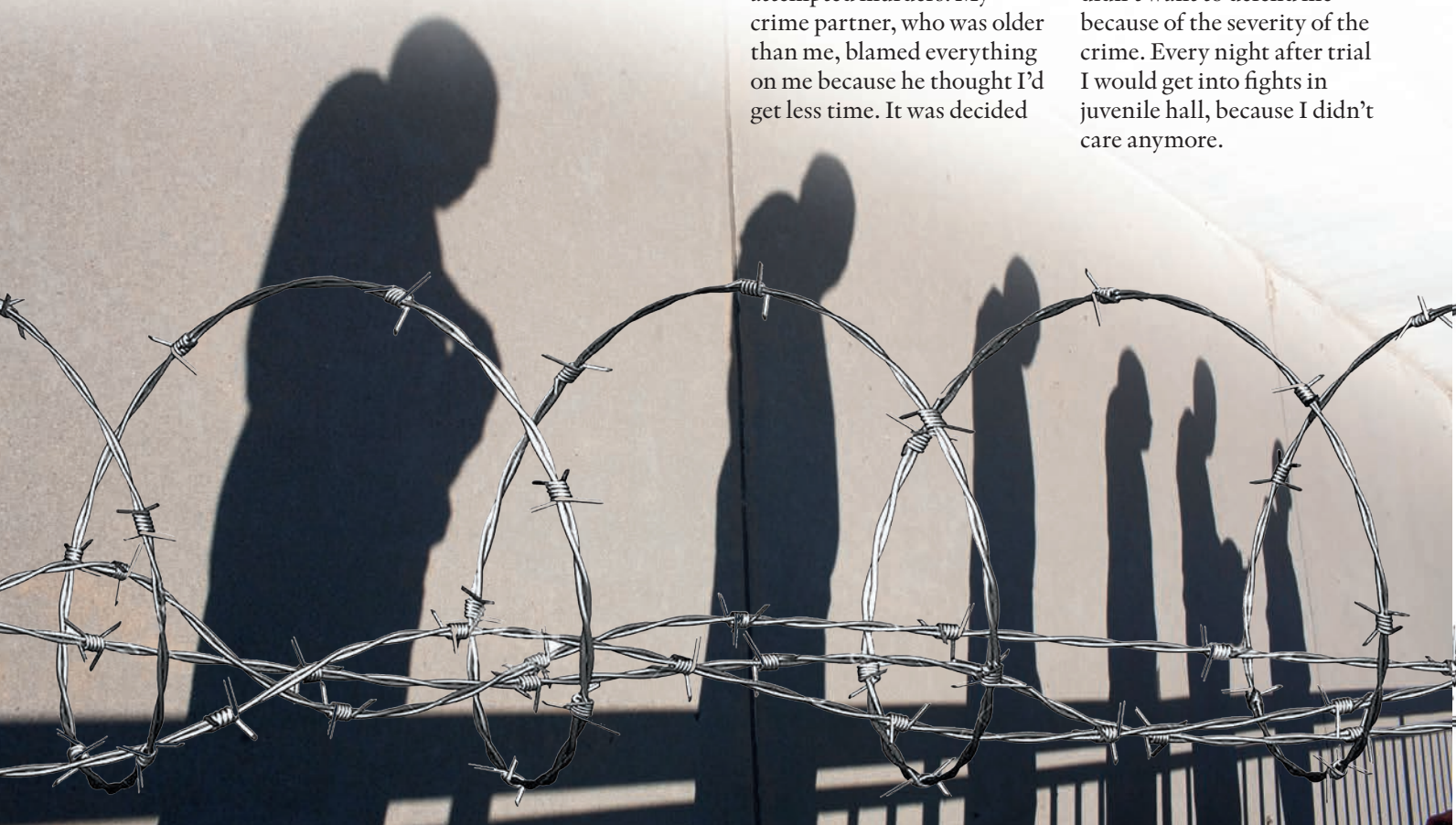
When Michael was accused of attempted murder he stopped caring about anything. Every evening after court he fought with other children and with the staff of the Juvenile Hall. He was often sent to 'the box', solitary confinement, to calm down.

– not understanding life. Confused, cold and heartless. I unleashed all those feelings on people I felt were the enemy.

Caught again

Three months after I turned 15 I was arrested on five attempted murders. My crime partner, who was older than me, blamed everything on me because he thought I'd get less time. It was decided

that I should be sentenced in adult court. I had everything stacked against me: Two women, who were among the victims testifying against us; my crime partner telling on me; 'gang experts' pointing at me; my public defender who didn't want to defend me because of the severity of the crime. Every night after trial I would get into fights in juvenile hall, because I didn't care anymore.





Michael is now locked up along with around 3,800 other prisoners in Calipatria State Prison. Almost half of them are serving life sentences. The prison is in the Mojave desert, near the border with Mexico. In the summer time the temperature can reach 47 degrees Celsius (117 degrees Fahrenheit) in the prison yard.

But I remember one time after they had thrown me in the ‘box’, the isolation cell, for fighting with staff. I suddenly thought to myself; “Nobody is doing this to me. I’m doing this to myself. If this is going to be my home for the rest of my life, why make it worse than it already is.”

I started to read books, and found ways to keep busy, like watching movies. I love to

read about all the different places where I’ve never been. Things I’ve never seen. Learning about how people struggle in other countries that are way worse than mine. Education is the key, I think.

Sentenced to life

I wasn’t surprised when I got a life sentence. I told my mom when she visited me a week

before I was convicted: ‘Don’t let them see you cry in there’. That day I walked into the court room, hoping the jury had not been able to agree, knowing that it wouldn’t happen. When they said ‘Guilty’ for the first attempted murder, I put my head down, knowing my fate had been sealed in stone. But then I picked my head up, refusing to let them see me lost. I smiled to show them that they could not break me. But I cried after, when they took me back to my cell, because I knew my future.

Now I feel stronger than I’ve ever been. New laws are coming to help kids like me. Some of us never knew we had any other choice but to live the life we lived. Maybe it took the worst for us to realise that we can make the best out of this worst. When you no longer have anything to lose, you have everything to gain. As long as you don’t sit there feeling sorry for yourself. We all have something that makes us happy. We can help ourselves.” 🌐



Michael has not seen his mother for two years, but they write letters to one another. ‘When Javier comes here it feels just like getting a visitor,’ says Michael.

We forgive

Itzel was twelve when her big sister Zuri was killed by her boyfriend. Her family chose to forgive him instead of demanding revenge. Today, they fight with Javier against demands for revenge and long sentences.

Eddie, the boyfriend, was extremely jealous. “He had been getting counselling to control his anger better, but they had been fighting that day. They loved each other but Eddie was upset and said he was going to kill himself,” recalls Itzel.

Late that evening, the family were all in their shared bedroom. Itzel, her parents and siblings, and Zuri’s three-year-old son and newborn daughter. Nobody could sleep. Itzel prayed with her mother that Eddie would calm down. But around midnight, there was a loud bang. All the lights went out and furniture and plaster fell all around them. Eddie had driven his car right into the house.

Shouts for revenge

Zuri and her 14-year-old daughter died in the crash. Eddie was arrested and charged with two murders and six attempted murders. Friends and family members tried to comfort Itzel’s family. Many said, “He should die for what he did!” But Itzel didn’t want Eddie to die. Eddie’s little sister Ruby was her best friend and they were both sure that Eddie didn’t mean to hurt anyone other than himself.

“He snapped, went chaotic and wanted to die,” said Itzel. Her parents felt the same. When Eddie’s family came to ask for forgiveness, they all cried together.



“You suffer from this tragedy, just like us,” said her father, Tomás. “Hatred and revenge doesn’t bring back our loved ones. It just poisons the souls of the people.”

Testifying for Eddie

The prosecutor in the trial thought Zuri’s family should fight for as tough a sentence as possible for Eddie, maybe even the death penalty. But instead, Itzel’s parents wanted Eddie to get help in prison. Her mother said,

“I feel pain every day, but it won’t help me to know that another mother will suffer, waiting for her son’s execution.”

Neither her words nor Eddie’s deep remorse helped. Javier accompanied them on the last day of the trial, and he became angry when he heard the prosecutor saying terrible things about Eddie, and criticising the victims’ family for not wanting revenge. Both the families began to cry when they realised that nobody cared how they felt. Before the trial was over, they stood up and walked out of the courtroom. They knew already that Eddie would be sentenced to die in prison. 🌐



“Before my sister died I didn’t know what do in life, but now I have a passion for justice. I want to be a lawyer and make a difference,” says Itzel.



Itzel (furthest to the right) with Eddie’s mum, her mum and Eddie’s sister, her best friend Ruby. They support one another and other families affected by loss and sorrow. They want forgiveness and hope instead of bitterness and revenge.



Four years have passed, but Itzel’s family still think about Zuri and Naomi every day.

Big brother is gone

Sometimes it feels like Ismael doesn't have a big brother any more. His brother Omar was arrested and sentenced to life in prison at the age of 14. Now they only see each other a few times a year.

Ismael, 11, doesn't know why Omar is in prison. "My parents don't want to tell me yet. They think I'm too little to understand, but I think I'm old enough. It stresses me out. Sometimes I feel like an adult in a child's body. I wish I had a big brother at home, someone who could help me with homework, play games and be there on my birthday. He will miss my graduation, and when I get married one day. It's sad."

"It's like we grew up and he got left behind," says his big sister Yenci, 18. "It really hurts. No one can understand unless they've gone through it."

Always worried

It all started when Omar made friends with some kids from a violent gang. He started staying out late and he changed – became sad and angry. One evening the police brought him home. They told him to lift his shirt and show his new gang tattoo to his shocked mother. Eventually the family moved to another

neighbourhood to save Omar. So he packed a bag and disappeared. His mother and father often drove around looking for him, but they never found him. Not long after, he was arrested.

Moved far away

In the beginning Omar was imprisoned close to his family and they saw each other often. But when he was moved to California's infamous supermax prison, Pelican Bay, the visits decreased because of the 15-hour drive to get there.

"Sometimes we sit on opposite sides of a glass pane, and talk on a phone, one at a time," says Ismael. "But my mom wants the phone all the time! It's better in the visiting room, where we can give him a hug and talk together."

Constant worry

"Don't worry about me," Omar always writes in his letters, but his family are always worried.

"It's bad in there, they fight. Omar got his nose and fingers broken," says Ismael. "But he's changed, he's gotten smarter and started going to school. My dream is that he will be free one day." 🌐



Ismael misses his brother, who was sentenced to life in prison.



Ismael, 11

Loves: My family.

Plays: Saxophone. Recorder.

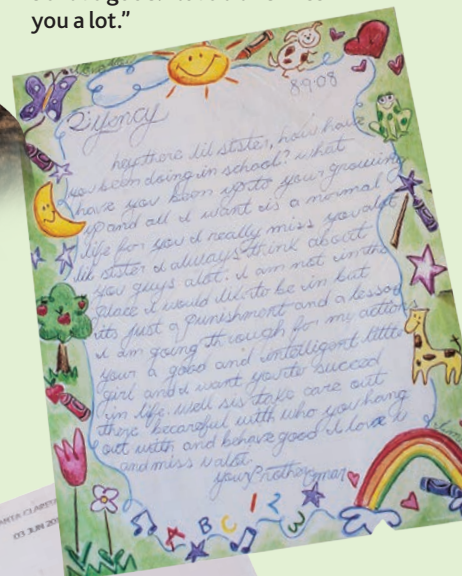
Makes me angry: Bullying and racism.

Wants to be: A lawyer.

Misses: My big brother.

Omar writes in a letter:

"I'm not in the place I want to be in, but it is a punishment and a lesson I have to go through for my actions... Be careful about who you hang around with and behave good. I love u and miss you a lot."



Ismael is preparing to visit his brother Omar, who was sentenced to life in prison for a crime he committed when he was 14.

