Proskauer

Supporting Legal Aid and Second Chances: A Conversation on Sentencing Reform

Proskauer For Good on **July 10, 2025**

This summer's annual event highlighting Proskauer's participation in the Associates' Campaign for Legal Aid (an effort led by associates at top New York City law firms to raise funds) carried special significance, as both Proskauer and The Legal Aid Society are celebrating their 150th anniversaries in 2025.

The event opened with remarks from Ted Hausman, Supervising Attorney at The Legal Aid Society's Criminal Appeals Bureau, who outlined the state of New York's sentencing landscape:

- More than 33,000 people are incarcerated in New York.
- Over 5,000 people are serving sentences longer than 15 years.
- New York lacks a systemic method to secure sentencing relief for people who are serving excessively long sentences and have exhausted their appeals.

Mr. Hausman emphasized the need for legislative reform, specifically pointing to the proposed Second Look Act, which would allow New York judges to reevaluate lengthy sentences for individuals, taking their rehabilitation and present circumstances into account. He also underscored the importance of parole advocacy as a critical part of Legal Aid's efforts to help those who have demonstrated growth and readiness for reentry.

One of the most poignant moments of the event was a deeply moving conversation with Walter Johnson, whose powerful journey, from a quintuple life sentence to compassionate release, sheds light on the impact of harsh sentencing laws and the power of second chances.

Once sentenced under the federal “three strikes” law, Mr. Johnson spent nearly three decades in prison before being granted compassionate release. Despite having little hope of release while incarcerated, Mr. Johnson explained that he remained committed to personal growth and supporting those around him by becoming a mentor and educator to fellow inmates, completing hundreds of voluntary programs, and even helping launch a victim’s impact program while in custody, which is now recognized across the federal prison system.

His commitment to growth and service did not go unnoticed. Moved by Mr. Johnson’s extraordinary rehabilitation, Judge Fredric Block, the very judge who had sentenced him, ultimately granted him compassionate release in 2024 under the First Step Act. Mr. Johnson spoke about how their relationship has since evolved into a meaningful partnership rooted in shared values. In a powerful display of unity, the two recently appeared together on CBS News to share their story and advocate for broader reform. Mr. Johnson shared a touching moment when Judge Block gifted him a signed copy of his 2024 book, *A Second Chance: A Federal Judge Decides Who Deserves One*—a work that reflects their shared belief in redemption and calls for sentencing reform through the lens of real-life compassionate release cases.

Mr. Johnson also spoke openly about his upbringing, how service gave his life purpose while in custody, and the deep challenges people face upon reentry. He emphasized the critical role of pro bono legal work, crediting the lawyers who took on his case with changing the course of his life by opening the door to a second chance.

Since returning home, Mr. Johnson explained how he has continued to serve others and has become a vocal advocate for criminal justice reform. He currently leads Champions for Change Inc., a nonprofit that supports formerly incarcerated individuals in rebuilding their lives. His advocacy has also reached national media platforms, where he continues to share his story to elevate the conversation around rehabilitation and sentencing reform.

Above all, the event highlighted the importance of pro bono representation, policy reform, and tireless efforts of organizations like Legal Aid in achieving access to justice. It served as a powerful reminder that the law is not static, and neither are the people it touches. Mr. Johnson’s compelling story dispelled any doubt that people can change, affirming that those who do deserve not only recognition, but a genuine second chance.

Intern Katrina Greene contributed to the drafting of this blog post.

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