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Does Sentencing a Teenager to Life in Prison Without Parole Serve Our Society Well? ‘15 to Life: Kenneth’s Story’ Follows a Young Tampa Man’s Plea For Redemption, Monday, Aug. 4, 2014 on WEDU PBS

Documentary Reveals that the United States Is the Only Country in the World that Routinely Condemns Children to Die in Prison

“Social-justice documentaries aren’t always as engaging as you’d like them to be—they can be preachy, decidedly one-sided or two-dimensional. Not so for this little gem. . . . it does a fine job of using one very human story to make a larger point about the criminal justice system.” 4 stars (out of 5)

—Erin Sullivan, *Orlando Weekly*



Tampa, FL – In June 2000, 14-year-old Kenneth Young was convinced by a 24-year-old neighborhood crack dealer—Kenneth’s mother’s supplier—to join him on a month-long spree of four armed robberies. The older man planned the **Tampa, FL** heists and brandished the pistol—and, on one occasion, he was talked out of raping one of the victims by his young partner, Kenneth. Fortunately, no one was physically injured during the crimes, although the trauma that resulted was immeasurable.



TOP: Kenneth Young at his resentencing hearing, with his mother and niece in the background.

BOTTOM: US Hwy 19 in Tampa, FL

When they were caught, Kenneth didn’t deny his part. It was his first serious scrape with the law. But at 15, he was tried under Florida law as an adult. Astoundingly, he received four consecutive life sentences—guaranteeing that he would die in prison. **15 to Life: Kenneth’s Story** follows the young African-American man’s battle for release, after more than 10 years of incarceration, much of it spent in solitary confinement. The film is also a disturbing portrait of an extraordinary fact: The United States is the only country in the world that condemns juveniles to life without parole.

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Nadine Pequenezza's documentary **15 to Life: Kenneth's Story** has its national broadcast premiere on **Monday, Aug. 4, 2014** at 10 p.m. on **WEDU PBS** as part of the 27th season of the **POV (Point of View)** series. American television's longest-running independent documentary series, POV is the recipient of a 2013 MacArthur Foundation Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Kenneth's sentence was not a rarity. As **15 to Life** shows, there are more than 2,500 juveniles serving life sentences in the United States for non-lethal crimes, as well as for murder. In the 1990s, many states reacted to a rise in violent youth crimes by amending their laws to allow more juveniles to be tried as adults. Then, in 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in **Graham v. Florida** that life sentences for juveniles convicted of crimes other than murder were unconstitutional. That made 77 Florida inmates, including Kenneth, eligible for early release. But how would the Florida courts, historically in favor of juvenile life sentences, apply the Supreme Court decision to a decade-old case?

The cast of **15 to Life** includes the legal advocates who have taken up Kenneth's cause. Paolo Annino, head of Florida State University's Children in Prison Project and a co-director of the Public Interest Law Center in Tallahassee, has long argued that life sentences for juveniles violate the Constitution's ban on "cruel and unusual punishment." His research was cited in *Graham v. Florida*, which opened the door for resentencing Kenneth and thousands of others.

Corinne Koeppen, a new lawyer and trainee at the Public Interest Law Center, joins Paolo Annino. They argue for Kenneth's immediate release, contending he has shown the rehabilitation and maturity that the Supreme Court decision requires. They also set out to prove that Kenneth played much less of a role in the crimes than his adult co-defendant.

Public-interest lawyer Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala., provides perspective on the decade-long fight to win fair sentencing for children. "The United States permitted the death penalty for juveniles until 2005," he says. "When we finally persuaded the Supreme Court to ban the death penalty for children, I was clear that that . . . life imprisonment without parole would still not be a just outcome for many of these kids."

The other key character in Kenneth's story is his guilt-ridden mother, Stephanie, who struggles to convince the court that her son deserves the help she never gave him. Although she is clean and sober now, she was a crack addict for 19 years and largely absent as a mother after Kenneth's father died. "I know the judge has a heart," she says. "I've prayed and I asked for forgiveness on behalf of me and my son."

At the core of the story, of course, stands Kenneth, now 26, who is candid about his crimes. He says he has followed a path of self-improvement and is remorseful for what he did, even as he remains flabbergasted about his punishment. (Oddly enough, in a separate trial, Jacques Bethea, the older man who organized the robberies and who carried the gun, received a single life sentence.)

At his hearing for a reduced sentence, Kenneth tells the court, "I have lived with regret every day. . . . I have been incarcerated for 11 years and I have taken advantage of every opportunity available for me in prison to better myself. . . . I am no longer the same person I used to be. First Corinthians, Chapter 13, Verse 11 says: 'When I was a child I thought as a child. When I became a man I put away all childish things.' I want to turn around and apologize to my victim for what I did."

(more)

Kenneth's plight elicits mixed reactions. While some of his victims are inclined to see him let go, others, along with the prosecutor, defend the original punishment. Kenneth's contention that the older man coerced his cooperation by threatening his mother is dismissed, because he didn't speak up as a 15-year-old at his original trial. And arguments that Kenneth's new sentence should take into account his rehabilitation may not convince this Florida court.

15 to Life is an eye-opening portrait of the American justice system as it stands today, putting an indelibly human face on its policies concerning children.

"Few of us would question whether our 13- or 14-year-old needs guidance," says director Nadine Pequenez. "As parents we recognize that our children are easily influenced, that they can be impulsive and that empathy and cruelty are both learned behaviors. Given what we know, I was shocked to learn that kids as young as 12 years old are being sentenced to die in prison."

"As I began to research, reading articles, reports and studies from individuals and groups on both sides of this argument, I discovered some shocking statistics: 60 percent of children sentenced to life without parole are first time offenders and every 13- and 14-year-old sentenced to life without parole for a non-homicide crime is a child of color."

"When children commit crimes, should rehabilitation take precedence over punishment? Can children be ruled to be adults, based on a single action? Can children who commit violent acts be rehabilitated? By focusing on Kenneth's story, I set out to find answers."

15 to Life is a HitPlay Production the will premiere on **WEDU PBS** on **Monday, August 4 at 10 p.m.** To view a preview of this program, visit: <http://video.wedu.org/video/2365202390/>

About the Filmmaker:

Nadine Pequenez, Director/Producer

Nadine Pequenez began her career as a broadcast journalist for Canada's flagship news and current affairs programs, CTV's *W5* and CBC's *The National*. For the past 15 years she has created award-winning documentaries for Canadian and international audiences. Her work has screened at festivals around the world from Toronto to Milan, Prague to Sichuan, China. She is a four-time Canadian Screen Award nominee in both directing and writing categories. Among her feature documentaries are *Inside Disaster Haiti* (2011), *Aristide's Haiti* (2006) and *Raising Cassidy* (2003). She lives in Toronto.

ABOUT WEDU PBS

WEDU PBS is West Central Florida's primary PBS station and public media company reaching 16 counties through media platforms including on-air programming and online experiences that broaden horizons, transport and transform and open gateways to new ideas and new worlds. Financially supported by the community, the organization offers a wealth of award-winning inspirational, educational and enlightening content over a variety of media platforms including: television programming, station's website, [wedu.org](http://www.wedu.org) and various social media platforms, monthly member magazine *Premiere*, educational outreach activities and a myriad of special events. WEDU's focus on the local community has resulted in the station being regarded as a beacon of trust for men, women and children of every walk of life no matter their age, ethnicity or socio-economic status. WEDU is a treasured community resource; a window to the world for the homebound and a vital educational source for the youngest members of society. WEDU prides itself on its position in the Tampa Bay community as a leader, partner, informed citizen and a member of PBS, the most trusted institution in America (ORC International's DualFrame CARAVAN, January 2014). For more information, program schedules or to support WEDU PBS, visit [wedu.org](http://www.wedu.org), WEDU Public Media on Facebook and Twitter or call 813.254.9338.

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