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## Juvenile Killers and Life Terms: a Case in Point

By **ETHAN BRONNER**

LA BELLE, Pa. — To this day, Maurice Bailey goes to sleep trying to understand what happened on Nov. 6, 1993, when as a 15-year-old high school student he killed his 15-year-old girlfriend, Kristina Grill, a classmate who was pregnant with his child.

“I go over it pretty much every night,” said Mr. Bailey, now 34, sitting in his brown jumpsuit here at the Fayette State Correctional Institution in western Pennsylvania, where he is serving a sentence of life without parole for first-degree murder. “I don’t want to make excuses. It’s a horrible act I committed. But as you get older, your conscience and insight develop. I’m not the same person.”

Every night, Bobbi Jamriska tries to avoid going over that same event. Ms. Jamriska, Kristina’s sister, was a 22-year-old out for a drink with friends when she got the news. Ten months later, their inconsolable mother died of complications from pneumonia. Weeks later, their grandmother died.

“During that year, I buried four generations of my family,” Ms. Jamriska said at the dining room table of her Pittsburgh house, taking note of her sister’s unborn child. “This wrecked my whole life. It completely changed the person I was.”

When the Supreme Court in June [banned life sentences without parole](#) for those under age 18 convicted of murder, it offered rare hope to more than 2,000 juvenile offenders like Mr. Bailey. But it threw Ms. Jamriska and thousands like her into anguished turmoil at the prospect that the killers of their loved ones might walk the streets again.

The ruling did not specify whether it applied retroactively to those in prison or to future juvenile felons. As state legislatures and courts struggle for answers, the clash of the two perspectives represented by Mr. Bailey and Ms. Jamriska is shaping the debate.

Resentencing hearings have begun in a few places, but very slowly.

The governor of Iowa commuted the mandatory life sentences of his state’s juvenile offenders but said they had to stay in jail for 60 years before seeking parole, which critics said amounted to life in prison. Some Iowa resentencing is starting in courts despite that proclamation.

In Florida, a few hearings are in early stages even though an intermediate court ruled that juveniles serving mandatory life terms did not have the right to be resentenced. In North Carolina, life without parole has been changed from a requirement to an option, with a 25-year minimum sentence for those seeking parole.

Here in Pennsylvania, which has the most juvenile offenders serving life terms — about 480 — the State Supreme Court is examining retroactivity while the legislature works on a bill that would put felons like Mr. Bailey behind bars for a minimum of 35 years.

The United States Supreme Court decision said that sentences of life without parole for juveniles failed to take account of the role of the offender in the crime (killer or accomplice), the family background (stable or abusive) and the incomplete brain development of the young. Recent research has found that youths are prone to miscalculate risks and consequences, and that their moral compasses are not fully developed. They can change as they get older.

Mr. Bailey was a good student with no criminal record. He is black and Ms. Grill was white, and many classmates thought of them as a chic couple.

“Reese was someone everyone wanted to be friends with, and so was Krissy,” said Shavera Maxwell, a former classmate, using the couple’s nicknames. “They were deeply in love, and she wanted to keep the baby. He didn’t.”

Kristina’s father, who did not live at home, was known for a bigoted attitude, so Kristina kept her relationship with Maurice secret from him.

Maurice’s father, an electrical engineer who had tensions with white co-workers, also disapproved of the interracial romance. One day when he came home early, he caught the couple in bed. He threw her out and beat Maurice, knocking his head into a wall.

Maurice’s mother, Debra Bailey, felt differently. She welcomed Kristina into her home. “Krissy’s 15th birthday was celebrated with a barbecue in our backyard,” said Ms. Bailey, a database coordinator at Carnegie Mellon University, who is now divorced from Maurice’s father. “Her family didn’t come. Those two were too young to be doing what they were doing, but I told her that if she got pregnant, we would deal with it.”

Kristina told a friend, Pamela Cheeks, the night before she was killed that she was about to tell her family about her pregnancy and that she was meeting Maurice the next day to discuss their future, Ms. Cheeks said in an interview. In her diary, Kristina wrote that Maurice “better show up” at their agreed time and place.

Maurice did meet Kristina that Saturday afternoon at an elementary school playground. He came with a knife, stabbed her repeatedly in the neck and upper body and left her on the ground. Before leaving, he told the police at the time, he zipped up her jacket in a vain effort to stem the bleeding.

He hid the knife in the woods and went home. In the prison interview, he said he remembered very little of the event except that right after stabbing Kristina, her mother, whom he had never met, suddenly came into his mind. When he returned home, the first person he saw was his father. He said he felt an odd sense of relief that the source of tension between them was gone.

Neighborhood youngsters came upon Kristina’s body. Police officers went to her home, where they found her diary with detailed entries of her relationship with Maurice. When the police went to the Bailey home in the middle of that night and woke up Maurice, his mother recalls that he said to them, “I figured you’d come.”

Maurice's legal defense was built around the pressures he had faced. His father testified in court that he had told Maurice that if Kristina got pregnant, he would kill her. Maurice's grades were declining as he spent more time with Kristina; he was trying unsuccessfully to break up with her, losing control, growing afraid.

His petition for a new hearing will argue that the pressures he felt as a 15-year-old — a violent father, a pregnant girlfriend — are unique to youth and therefore covered by the Supreme Court ruling. An adult, his lawyers will argue, would have reacted differently.

But Kristina's sister, Ms. Jamriska, said there was no escaping the brutality of the crime and its premeditation. As she put it: "There are many ways of dealing with pressure. You can run away. I don't care if you're 5 or 50, you know that killing is wrong. If you murder your girlfriend and unborn baby, I don't know if you can come back from that."

She added that she felt that much discussion of juvenile crime shied away from the horrors of the acts. "They often show pictures of the killers looking like kids who could be trick-or-treating," she said.

Ms. Jamriska, 41, who works in marketing for medical equipment, is active in a group of families of victims, the [National Organization of Victims of Juvenile Lifers](#). She said that such offenders received almost no rehabilitation in prison and that letting them out was not only unfair to victims' families but also posed a risk.

In the two-hour conversation in prison, Mr. Bailey did not entirely dispute that. Like others serving life sentences, he has not been allowed to take classes or vocational training because it is viewed as a waste of resources. He has taken an interest in cooking and prepares inmates' meals from 5 a.m. to 1 p.m. each day. He has a good record of behavior in prison.

Since the Supreme Court ruling, Mr. Bailey and other juvenile offenders have begun talking about the decision and themselves.

"We discuss it while working out in the yard," Mr. Bailey said, his bulked-up arms evidence of his two-hour daily exercise routine. "We are having the same debates on it as you are outside. Years ago, I'd have said, 'Just let us out.' But if the wrong juvenile lifer is let out and he goes off and kills again, it could ruin it for the rest of us. I know that I would never commit such an act again."

Ms. Jamriska said there was no way to predict that.

"There are thousands of family members who can't deal with it at all," she said. "They thought this was behind them and now discover that they may have to relive the horrors again, return to the court again. Whatever sense of closure they had is gone. We were stripped of finality by five people in Washington."