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All the Sara Kruzans deserve a chance

L.A. Times Archives

Jan. 4, 2011 12 AM PT

The controversial decision to shorten Esteban Nuñez's prison sentence has obscured a more important commutation that outgoing Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger granted a young woman who has fought to turn her life around from its almost unbelievably bad beginning.

Sara Kruzan had been abused physically and sexually for most of her young life before she was gang raped, then pushed into a life of prostitution at age 13 by the neighborhood pimp. When she was 16, she robbed and killed the man, a crime for which she was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Sixteen years later, Kruzan has earned an associate's degree through the local community college, has participated in many of the prison's rehabilitation programs

and has shown a level of growth and maturity that makes her a promising candidate for rejoining society. Schwarzenegger's decision to reduce her sentence to 25 years to life with the possibility of parole gives her a chance to do just that.

It's important to note that Kruzan's commuted sentence doesn't mean she will be freed from prison. Rather, it gives her an incentive to continue her rehabilitation and an opportunity to show a parole board that she has done so; her legal team believes she'll be eligible for parole several years from now.

Kruzan's case, and her new sentence, illustrate the value of a bill by state Sen. Leland Yee (D- San Francisco). SB 9 would allow courts to review, after 10 years, the cases of juveniles who were sentenced to life without parole, possibly reducing their sentences to 25 years to life. There are other potential Sara Kruzans in the criminal justice system, given life sentences at an age when their brains were still going through the developmental storms of adolescence. During the last decade in particular, studies have shown that teenage brains are still changing rapidly, particularly in the areas that govern control of behavior. Yee's bill would give worthy prisoners the same opportunity that Kruzan received from the governor.

The bill would not, as some critics claim, release violent young thugs onto the streets. It's not a free pass; rather, it's an opportunity for people who got into too much trouble when they were much too young to change the trajectory of their lives, and to prove to a parole board that they are ready to contribute to society instead of spending their lives as a public liability.

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