

Kids Are Kids—Until They Commit Crimes

By Marjie Lundstrom

Sacramento Bee, March 1, 2001

- 1 A week from now, a judge in Florida will decide how old Lionel Tate really is.
- 2 Never mind that he is indisputably twelve at the time of “the incident.” Is he a boy? Or a man?
- 3 It is a vexing question these days for the under-eighteen crowd, the group we routinely write off as “only kids.” It’s why they can’t smoke, or drink, or go to R movies without our OK. It’s why they don’t vote. It’s why they have curfews. It’s why we fret over their Internet access and fuss about driving privileges.
- 4 Hey, they’re only kids.
- 5 That is, until they foul up. Until they commit crimes. And the bigger the crime, the more eager we are to call them adults.
- 6 It’s a glaring inconsistency that’s getting more glaring by the hour as children as young as twelve and thirteen are being charged as adults in America’s courts.
- 7 A California appeals court recently stuck its nose into the quandary of when to charge young offenders as adults, returning that power to judges, not prosecutors.
- 8 Meanwhile, in Texas, a lawmaker has had it. You want to throw the adult book at kids? Fine, says Democratic state Rep. Ron Wilson of Houston.
- 9 Lower the voting age to fourteen.
- 10 And really, in light of things, how wacky is that? Today we are witness to criminal defendants—facing life sentences without parole—who cannot shave, still play with fire trucks and love to act out scenes from television or video games.
- 11 On March 9, Lionel Tate—who was twelve when he savagely beat to death a six-year-old girl—will likely learn if he must spend life in prison after his lawyer unsuccessfully tried to put pro wrestling on trial. Now fourteen and convicted as an adult of first-degree murder, Tate supposedly was imitating his World Wrestling Federation heroes when he pummeled his playmate, less than a third his size.
- 12 Last month in Sacramento, a fifteen-year-old Yuba City youth who reportedly claimed he was mimicking a TV program about little girls who rob a bank was given a 26-years-to-life prison term. Tried as an adult, Thomas A. Preciado was fourteen when he stabbed to death a minimart clerk.
- 13 In April, Court TV will air live daily coverage of the trial of Nathaniel Brazill, now fourteen, charged as an adult with first-degree murder. Brazill was thirteen and already in trouble for throwing water balloons when he returned to his Lake Worth, Fla., middle school and shot to death an English teacher, who would not let him say good-bye to two girls on the final day of classes.

- 14 This is not to say that the boys' crimes were not heinous, or that they should go unpunished. No one's talking about coddling here. But the zeal to corral wildly troubled, ever-younger kids and ram them through the adult system belies everything the juvenile justice system is all about: that kids are different. Their reasoning is not fully developed.
- 15 They are not adults.
- 16 "We've created this image that teenagers are something to be feared," said Dan Macallair of the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in San Francisco.
- 17 This warped vision of America's youth was given an unfortunate boost with the recent arrest of two seemingly "good kids" in the brutal slayings of two Dartmouth College professors. Before they were even arrested, prosecutors had charged the teenagers, sixteen and seventeen, as adults.
- 18 Trouble is, statistics don't bear out the hysteria. While politicians and prosecutors press for hard-line stands against youthful offenders—nearly every state has moved to make it easier to charge kids as adults—juvenile crime is way down.
- 19 The nation's juvenile arrest rate for murder fell 68 percent from 1993 to 1999, hitting its lowest level since 1966, according to the Justice Department. The juvenile arrest rate for violent crime overall fell 36 percent from 1994 to 1999.
- 20 Macallair believes the excitable media have perpetuated and fueled the youth-violence scare of the 1980s. In fact, California voters were so persuaded by tough-on-crime rhetoric they passed Proposition 21 last March, shifting the power from judges to prosecutors in deciding which juveniles to charge as adults in certain crimes.
- 21 Sensibly, the 4th District Court of Appeals in San Diego disagreed, finding that the provision violated the separation-of-powers principle. The San Diego district attorney has vowed to appeal.
- 22 But the fact remains, politics and demagoguery do not make good public policy. Research suggests that adolescents squeezed through the adult system are more likely to come out as violent career criminals than similar kids handled on the juvenile side.
- 23 More lives, lost.
- 24 So what, then, to do about Lionel Tate—a kid who apparently still doesn't understand that "pile-driving" fellow inmates is not a good thing?
- 25 In another week, he will find out who tucks him in at night. And where.

Startling Finds on Teenage Brains

By Paul Thompson

Sacramento Bee, Friday, May 25, 2001

- 1 Emotions ran high at the trial of Nathaniel Brazill in West Palm Beach, Fla., two weeks ago. Friends of slain teacher Barry Grunow called for the death penalty, while a growing crowd of demonstrators outside the courthouse wielded hastily written placards reading, "A child is not a man." Jurors returned with their verdict May 16: Fourteen-year-old Brazill, charged in last May's shooting of middle-school teacher Grunow, was found guilty of second-degree murder.
- 2 A Florida grand jury had previously ruled that Brazill, who frequently looked dazed during the trial, would be tried as an adult, and if he had been convicted of first-degree murder he would have faced life in prison without parole. But Brazill's immaturity was evident throughout this incident—from the act itself of Brazill's shooting a teacher he considered one of his favorites, to his subsequent inability to give a reason for doing so, to the various quizzical looks that came across his face as the verdicts were read.
- 3 In terms of cognitive development, as research on the human brain has shown, Brazill—and any other young teen—is far from adulthood.
- 4 Over the last several years, as school shootings have seemed to occur with disturbing frequency, startling discoveries have emerged about the teenage brain. The White House held a televised conference on adolescent development in May of last year, and a flurry of papers on the teen brain has appeared in top science journals. Reporters and teen advocates ask: Do the studies help explain the impulsive, erratic behavior of teens? The biggest surprise in recent teen-brain research is the finding that a massive loss of brain tissue occurs in the teen years.
- 5 Specifically, my own research group at the University of California, Los Angeles, and our colleagues at the National Institutes of Health have developed technology to map the patterns of brain growth in individual children and teenagers. With repeated brain scans of kids from three to twenty, we pieced together "movies" showing how brains grow and change.
- 6 Some changes make perfect sense: Language systems grow furiously until age twelve and then stop, coinciding with the time when children learn foreign languages fastest. Mathematical brain systems grow little until puberty, corresponding with the observation that kids have difficulty with abstract concepts before then. Basically, the brain is like a puzzle, and growth is fastest in the exact parts the kids need to learn skills at different times. So far, all well and good.
- 7 But what really caught our eye was a massive loss of brain tissue that occurs in the teenage years. The loss was like a wildfire, and you could see it in every teenager. Gray matter, which brain researchers believe supports all our thinking and emotions, is purged at a rate of 1 percent to 2 percent a year during this period. Stranger still, brain cells and connections are only being lost in the areas controlling impulses, risk-taking, and self-control. These frontal lobes, which inhibit our violent passions, rash actions, and regulate our emotions, are vastly immature throughout the teenage years.

- 8 The implications are tantalizing. Brazill was only thirteen when he committed his crime. He said he made a “stupid mistake,” but prosecutors argued that by bringing a gun to school he planned the crime.
- 9 Does “planning” mean the same thing for a thirteen-year-old, with his diminished capacity for controlling erratic behavior, as it means for an adult? The verdict, in this case, seems to line up with the research. The jurors, by returning a verdict of second-degree murder instead of first, indicated that they believe Brazill’s actions, while not accidental, were not fully thoughtout, either.
- 10 Linking this maelstrom of normal brain change with legal or moral accountability is tough: Even though normal teens are experiencing a wildfire of tissue loss in their brains, that does not remove their accountability. What is clear from the research is that the parts of the frontal lobes that inhibit reckless actions restructure themselves with startling speed in the teen years. Given this delicate—and drastic—reshaping of the brain, teens need all the help they can get to steer their development onto the right path.
- 11 While research on brain-tissue loss can help us to understand teens better, it cannot be used to excuse their violent or homicidal behavior. But it can be used as evidence that teenagers are not yet adults, and the legal system shouldn’t treat them as such.

Paul Thompson is an assistant professor of neurology at the University of California, Los Angeles, School of Medicine.

On Punishment and Teen Killers

By Jennifer Jenkins

Juvenile Justice Information Exchange, Aug 2, 2011

- 1 “Some persons will shun crime even if we do nothing to deter them, while others will seek it out even if we do everything to reform them. Wicked people exist. Nothing avails except to set them apart from innocent people.”
— **James Q. Wilson, Harvard Professor and Crime Expert**
- 2 My youngest sister was the joy of our close family. When a teenager murdered her and her husband in 1990 in suburban Chicago, she was pregnant with their first child. She begged for the life of her unborn child as he shot her. He reported to a friend, who testified at his trial, about his “thrill kill” that he just wanted to “see what it would feel like to shoot someone.”
- 3 This offender is now serving three life sentences in the Illinois Department of Corrections. According to Charles Stimson, a leading expert in criminal law at the Heritage Foundation’s Center for Legal and Judicial Studies, he is one of 1,300 cases nationally of a teen killer sentenced as an adult to life, sometimes called JLWOP (Juvenile Life without Parole).
- 4 There are advocates who wish to minimize these offenders’ culpability simply because of their age. As a high school teacher, I have worked lovingly with teens all my life and I understand how hard it is to accept the reality that a 16 or 17 year old is capable of forming such requisite criminal intent.
- 5 We in America have to own this particular problem, with weapons so easily available to our youth, and the violence-loving culture in which we raise them. The Inuit people of northern Canada had no juvenile crime at all until 1980 and the introduction of television into their culture.
- 6 Both sides in the debate about JLWOP agree: Teens are being tried as adults and sentenced to prison for murder at alarming rates in the United States. But this actually disproves juvenile advocates’ reliance on the “underdeveloped brain” argument. If brain development were the reason, then teens would kill at roughly the same rates all over the world. They do not. Advocates often repeat, but truly misunderstand brain research on this issue. The actual science does not, according to experts such as Professor Stephen Morse, and others, in any way negate criminal culpability.
- 7 The offender in our case was a serial killer in the making. He came from privilege. Whenever he got in trouble, his parents fixed it. After a series of other crimes, he planned the murders for months, carefully and privately. He did not act on impulse or because of peer pressure. He was not mentally disabled—in fact was quite intelligent. But he got a rush out of breaking the law and ultimately started work on his other plan for mass murder at a local bank. Bragging to friends led to his arrest.
- 8 There are no words adequate to describe what this kind of traumatic loss does to a victim’s family. So few who work on the juvenile offender side can truly understand what the victims of their crimes sometimes go through. Some never recover.

- 9 The nationwide campaign to end JLWOP has spent millions of dollars advocating for these convicted murderers to be set free. Not a dime has been allocated for victim outreach or support.
- 10 With absolutely no regard to the impact on victims' families, they have published glossy "reports" widely distributed to the media and legislators. They feature propaganda photos of 7- and 8- year-old child models on the cover, with misleading headlines that the United States was "sentencing children to die in prison."
- 11 For the record, the nation is NOT sentencing children to die in prison. This photo is pure propaganda.
- 12 The juvenile death penalty was abolished here years ago and a life sentence still allows a great deal of good living to be done—even from behind bars—far more than these teen killers gave to our murdered loved ones.
- 13 Many JLWOP offenders are repeat violent offenders and many have killed multiple people. The propaganda campaign by the well-funded juvenile advocates attempts to paint a different picture.
- 14 Consistently, they don't talk about the facts of the crimes, just the "poor children in prison." And while we respect their right to advocate for reform, some of which is needed, we have begged them to embrace the victims of these crimes as well, and take a truly inclusive and restorative justice approach to their advocacy. Our pleas have fallen on mostly deaf ears.
- 15 The offender advocates have also promoted another horrible lie—that the United States is the only nation that sentences teens to life for murder. In fact, at least 11 other nations do, according to Stimson's research. Many nations do the equivalent and far worse—the juvenile death penalty, selling teens into sexual slavery, forced labor, sexual mutilation and the list goes on. Many nations do not have separate juvenile justice systems such as the enlightened system we have here, and many nations torture offenders of all ages without regard for human rights.
- 16 Legislative proposals for reforming JLWOP have been retroactive but without any victim notification, in full violation of constitutionally protected victims' rights. Advocates who wish to believe in the nobility of their actions cannot wrong murder victims' family members in this way without losing all credibility. Restorative Justice shows us the way out—a conversation focused on victims needs, with all stakeholders at the table.

Juveniles Don't Deserve Life Sentences

By Gail Garinger

New York Times, March 15, 2012.

- 1 In the late 1980s, a small but influential group of criminologists predicted a coming wave of violent juvenile crime: “superpredators,” as young as 11, committing crimes in “wolf packs.” Politicians soon responded to those fears, and to concerns about the perceived inadequacies of state juvenile justice systems, by lowering the age at which children could be transferred to adult courts. The concern was that offenders prosecuted as juveniles would have to be released at age 18 or 21.
- 2 At the same time, “tough on crime” rhetoric led some states to enact laws making it easier to impose life without parole sentences on adults. The unintended consequence of these laws was that children as young as 13 and 14 who were charged as adults became subject to life without parole sentences.
- 3 Nationwide, 79 young adolescents have been sentenced to die in prison — a sentence not imposed on children anywhere else in the world. These children were told that they could never change and that no one cared what became of them. They were denied access to education and rehabilitation programs and left without help or hope.
- 4 But the prediction of a generation of superpredators never came to pass. Beginning in the mid-1990s, violent juvenile crime declined, and it has continued to decline through the present day. The laws that were passed to deal with them, however, continue to exist. This month, the [United States Supreme Court](#) will hear oral arguments in two cases, *Jackson v. Hobbs* and *Miller v. Alabama*, which will decide whether children can be sentenced to life without parole after being convicted of homicide.
- 5 The court has already struck down the death penalty for juveniles and life without parole for young offenders convicted in nonhomicide cases. The rationale for these earlier decisions is simple and equally applicable to the cases to be heard: Young people are biologically different from adults. Brain imaging studies reveal that the regions of the adolescent brain responsible for controlling thoughts, actions and emotions are not fully developed. They cannot be held to the same standards when they commit terrible wrongs.
- 6 Homicide is the worst crime, but in striking down the juvenile death penalty in 2005, the [Supreme Court](#) recognized that even in the most serious murder cases, “juvenile offenders cannot with reliability be classified among the worst offenders”: they are less mature, more vulnerable to peer pressure, cannot escape from dangerous environments, and their characters are still in formation. And because they remain unformed, it is impossible to assume that they will always present an unacceptable risk to public safety.
- 7 The most disturbing part of the superpredator myth is that it presupposed that certain children were hopelessly defective, perhaps genetically so. Today, few believe that criminal genes are

inherited, except in the sense that parental abuse and negative home lives can leave children with little hope and limited choices.

- 8 As a former juvenile court judge, I have seen firsthand the enormous capacity of children to change and turn themselves around. The same malleability that makes them vulnerable to peer pressure also makes them promising candidates for rehabilitation.
- 9 An overwhelming majority of young offenders grow out of crime. But it is impossible at the time of sentencing for mental health professionals to predict which youngsters will fall within that majority and grow up to be productive, law-abiding citizens and which will fall into the small minority that continue to commit crimes. For this reason, the court has previously recognized that children should not be condemned to die in prison without being given a “meaningful opportunity to obtain release based on demonstrated maturity and rehabilitation.”
- 10 The criminologists who promoted the superpredator theory have acknowledged that their prediction never came to pass, repudiated the theory and expressed regret. They have joined several dozen other criminologists in an amicus brief to the court asking it to strike down life without parole sentences for children convicted of murder. I urge the justices to apply the logic and the wisdom of their earlier decisions and affirm that the best time to decide whether someone should spend his entire life in prison is when he has grown to be an adult, not when he is still a child.

[Gail Garinger](#), a juvenile court judge in Massachusetts from 1995 to 2008, is the state’s [child advocate](#), appointed by the governor.

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on March 15, 2012, on page A35 of the New York edition with the headline: **Juveniles Don’t Deserve Life Sentences.**

Greg Ousley Is Sorry for Killing His Parents. Is That Enough?

By Scott Anderson

New York Times, July 19, 2012

- 1 For 19 years, Greg Ousley has sought to make sense of the event that has haunted and dictated his life, but the answer, if such a simple thing exists, has remained forever beyond his grasp. In its place, he has hunches and half-formed theories. He can lay out a chronology of moments leading up to the event, but some of these are contradictory, others are mere fragments and all are trivial when stacked against what came next. Occasionally, though, he stumbles upon something that is raw and true, like when he describes what happened on the afternoon of Tuesday, Feb. 23, 1993, four days before he murdered his parents.
- 2 It was a normal day at his junior high school, but when Greg came home, he fought with his parents and defiantly locked himself in his bedroom. Greg's father, Jobie, knocked on the door for a minute or two, and when that had no effect, he returned to the couch to watch television.
- 3 In the prison where Greg told me this story, he gave a quick chuckle. "Well, there's no way my mom was gonna let that stand," he said, "so after she had a try and I still wouldn't come out, she got a hairpin and just picked the lock."
- 4 Bonnie Ousley found Greg lying on his stomach, refusing to speak or even look at her. She sat on the edge of the bed and began stroking his back. In the telling, Greg slid into present tense, pantomiming his mother's caress. "And she keeps saying: 'What's wrong, honey? What's going on with you? Talk to me. Just talk to me.' "
- 5 The 14-year-old boy told his mother that he was scared, that all he ever thought about was murder and suicide.
- 6 "And as soon as I say that, she takes her hand off my back." Greg, who is now 33, yanked his hand into the air, as if scalded. "She jumps up — 'You're just watching too many movies' — and walks out the room."
- 7 His face crumpled. Over the many hours I had spent with him, he rarely showed emotion, and the abruptness with which this came on seemed to startle and embarrass him. He took a minute to compose himself, then said: "I remember lying there thinking: Man, this is just never going to change. Mom and Dad, they are never, ever gonna listen to me. I've got no choice, I've got to go through with it."
- 8 "Go through with it?" I asked.
- 9 Greg gave a slow shrug of his shoulders. "Kill them."
- 10 Four nights later, at about 11:30, Greg went into his parents' bedroom with a 12-gauge shotgun and shot his father once in the head. Moments later, as his mother rushed for the telephone in the

dining room, he killed her with two more shots. Greg then drove the family pickup truck to his best friend's house three miles away. He told his friend what he had done and swore him to secrecy. Then he drove back to his home around 4 a.m., parked the pickup in the garage, placed the gun in the kitchen doorway and ran to a neighbor's house to raise the alarm.

- 11 The story Greg told the police — that he returned home from a late-night joy ride to find the shotgun on the floor and his mother lying dead just beyond — had holes in it from the outset, and those holes became gaping once his friend revealed what he knew to investigators. By midafternoon the next day, Greg finally broke down at the Kosciusko County sheriff's office in Warsaw, Ind., and provided a full confession.
- 12 “I had been thinking about killing them every time I get mad,” he told his interrogator. “They don't seem to understand me.” Indicative of either his youth or his mental state at that moment, Greg made a forlorn request of the detective: “Please don't tell my family.”
- 13 Despite Greg's age, his case was swiftly waived into the adult justice system. Facing the possibility of life in prison, he accepted a plea agreement of guilty but mentally ill. In early 1994, Greg, then 15, entered the Indiana penitentiary system to begin serving a 60-year sentence. He was one of the youngest adult inmates in the state's history.
- 14 Today there are well more than 2,500 juveniles serving time in adult prisons in the United States — enough, in Indiana's case, to fill a dedicated Y.I.A. (Youth Incarcerated as Adults) wing at Wabash Valley Correctional Facility. The United States is the only Western nation to routinely convict minors as adults, and the practice has set off a growing disquiet even in conservative legal circles. In 2005, the Supreme Court ruled that the death penalty for juveniles was unconstitutional, and just last month it similarly banned mandatory sentencing of life without parole in juvenile homicide cases.
- 15 But in this controversy, Greg Ousley is an unlikely representative for sentencing reform. He is not a 16-year-old doing 20 years for his third drug felony or a 13-year-old who found his father's loaded handgun and shot a playmate. What he is, or was, is a teenage boy who planned and carried out a crime so unthinkable that to most people it is not just a moral transgression but almost a biological one.
- 16 I first learned of Greg's crime in the spring of 2009, and I wrote him a letter asking if he would be willing to talk to me. I wasn't sure what I expected to find, but I wanted to understand how a man who had served 16 years for killing his parents made sense of what he had done and what his life could still be. The first time I saw him, that April, Greg was at Westville Correctional Facility, a sprawling medium-security complex set in the cornfields just east of Valparaiso. He was slighter than I expected — about 5-foot-10, with the wiry frame of a wrestler or a distance runner — and a good deal perkier, possessed of a quick-witted cheerfulness that was out of sync with his surroundings. Even more surprising, given the nature of his crimes, was the setting for our meeting. Rather than speaking in a visitors' hall or a monitored media room, Greg and I were led to a small conference room where we were allowed to visit, without supervision and Greg free of any restraints, for as long as we wished.

17 “I work across the hall from the superintendent,” Greg explained, “so they all know me.” He pointed out a window to a high fence topped with concertina wire, the innermost ring of Westville’s many barriers to the outside. “And let’s be honest,” he said, “where am I gonna go?” We talked that day for about five hours and nearly as long the next, the first of scores of conversations we would have in person or by phone over the next three years.

18 For a host of reasons, Greg’s story is a confounding one. Despite the media attention they often garner, instances of a child’s murdering a parent or stepparent — juvenile parricide, as it is legalistically known — are among the rarest of homicides, probably accounting for fewer than 75 of the some 15,000 murders committed in the United States in any given year. Seldom are both parents murdered.

19 Perhaps just as confounding as his crime, however, is the journey Greg has taken inside prison. To say that he has spent his entire adulthood behind bars doesn’t begin to capture the isolation he has experienced. While he had frequent visitors in the first few years of his incarceration, that number quickly trailed off. By the time of my appearance in April 2009, he had just three or four visitors in the previous decade, none of them family members. I realized after my first two conversations with him that those 9 or 10 hours constituted about half of all his contact with the outside world since he turned 20. Yet during this same period, Greg somehow managed to become a model inmate. After earning his high-school equivalency and attending nearly every anger- and stress-management workshop the penal system had to offer, he pursued a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts through Indiana State University’s correspondence program. In 2004, he graduated magna cum laude. (“I was a bit disappointed with that,” he told me. “I was hoping for summa cum laude, but I screwed up on this one class.”)

20 Just before I met Greg, his appeals lawyer petitioned the prosecutor for a sentence modification, a procedure in which, on a prosecutor’s recommendation, an Indiana judge might amend a sentence and grant an early release for a prisoner whose behavior and record in prison suggest complete rehabilitation. The prosecutor had previously rejected a handwritten appeal from Greg, but in early 2009 he agreed to allow the modification process to move forward, provided that none of the victims’ next of kin — meaning Greg’s two sisters and five aunts and uncles — objected. It suddenly opened up the possibility that, at 30, Greg might be released from prison years before his official eligibility date of March 2019.

21 “I’m really confident it’s going to happen,” he told me at our first meeting. “I have one aunt who might be a problem, but I’m pretty sure everyone else will totally support it.”

22 It was tempting to dismiss this as wishful thinking, except that the corrections officials I spoke with — and no group of professionals is more jaded, working as they do in an environment where nearly everyone is trying to work some angle — appeared to be the biggest supporters of Greg’s campaign. This was evident in the extraordinary freedom we were allowed in our discussions and also in the array of Westville officials, ranging from Greg’s casework manager, Dennis Hood, up to the prison superintendent, William Wilson, who made themselves available to extol the virtues of the bright and personable young man in their midst.

- 23 “He’s just a great worker,” Hood offered, “enthusiastic, solves problems on his own, never complains. I have no doubt he’ll succeed in whatever he puts his mind to when he’s released.”
- 24 His former work supervisor, Cindy Estes, was more explicit. “This kid has jumped through every hoop the state has put in front of him,” she told me. “He deserves to come out. There’s absolutely nothing to be gained by keeping him in there for another 10 years.”
- 25 Along with happy anticipation at the prospect of soon walking out into a world he hadn’t seen in 16 years, Greg was also clear on what he wanted to do there. “I want to work with young people,” he said. “I want to use my life as an example of what can go wrong, of how important it is when you’re that age to get help if you feel things closing in on you.” He recognized the cliché and gave a knowing laugh. “Yeah, I know, me and every other guy in here, right? But in my case, it’s true.” He grew more thoughtful. “It comes down to hope. That’s what I didn’t have at 14. I learned it in here. That’s what I can teach them.”
- 26 Since Freud, it has been generally assumed that the only way to unlock the mysteries of the psyche is to dissect your childhood, especially the formative influence of your parents. In Greg’s case, that process can quickly sound like the ultimate blame-the-victim excuse. It might also complicate one of his greatest goals, which is to reconcile with his extended family. As a result, he tends to intersperse negative anecdotes about his parents with statements like, “But that doesn’t mean they deserved what I did to them,” or with accounts of better times. He likes to talk about an essay he had to write in the fifth grade, on the person he most admired, and how he chose his mother.
- 27 “When I was little, she was just the greatest mom around,” he told me, “always playing with me, going to all my sports events. She was just so much fun.”
- 28 He had a far more distant relationship with his father. Greg says Jobie could go days without uttering a single word and can recall only one occasion when he told Greg that he loved him — and this, Greg says, occurred when Jobie was quite drunk. Chancy Schmucker, the friend Greg visited on the night of the murders, used the phrase “good ol’ boy” to describe Jobie. “He’d always be out in that workshed they had there, sitting in his old, ratty armchair, a cigarette in one hand, a can of beer in the other, listening to country music. If Greg and I came in, it was, ‘Hey boys, how’s it going?’ and that was about it.”
- 29 Although they first met in Indiana, Jobie and Bonnie were transplants from the same impoverished corner of southeastern Kentucky coal country, late travelers on the so-called Hillbilly Highway that, beginning after World War II, saw the mass exodus of poor whites out of Appalachia for the industrial cities of the Midwest. In Kosciusko County, a pleasant stretch of rolling farmland and lakes in northeastern Indiana, they prospered. With Jobie working as a press operator for R. R. Donnelley, a commercial printer in Warsaw, and Bonnie as a packer for Kimble Glass, they were able to provide a comfortable middle-class home for the three children who came along in the 1970s: Angie, Tammy and Greg. Around 1980, they moved into a three-bedroom ranch on a five-acre parcel of farmland two miles south of Pierceton, later adding a large deck in back and an aboveground pool.

- 30 Greg remembers his early childhood being a content one — long afternoons spent tramping through the surrounding woods with his friends, family vacations to the Indiana Dunes on Lake Michigan and to visit the extended Ousley clan back in Kentucky. It was neither a materially deprived existence nor a physically abusive one. Like most other kids growing up in rural Indiana, Greg got the occasional spanking, administered by his father, but rarely anything more severe than that. Yet even at a young age, he was aware of the profoundly circumscribed orbit in which his family moved. Sociologists have long noted a tendency among many of the Appalachian transplants to the Midwest to remain separate from the larger community. The Ousleys appear to have been an extreme example of this, rarely socializing with anyone other than three sets of relatives, all first cousins of Jobie's, and all of whom lived nearby. If easy and familiar in some ways, such tight social compacts can lead to a kind of pressure-cooker environment in times of family discord, and by the late 1980s, the Ousleys were living in constant discord.
- 31 Sometimes the arguments were between Greg's parents — usually centered on Jobie's drinking — but more frequently they were between Bonnie and her two teenage daughters, squabbles that occasionally escalated to slapping and hair-pulling. Much of the family strife may have had roots in the sad conditions of Bonnie's own childhood. Abandoned by her father at a young age, she was barely a teenager when her mother died. Essentially orphaned, she and her two siblings — a sister, one year older, and a brother, a couple of years younger — were sent north to Indiana to live with an aunt. The sorrows didn't end there. In the early '70s, her brother was killed in a motorcycle accident. As her own two daughters came of age and prepared to escape the fractious family home, Bonnie's history of loss seemed to manifest itself in rages at her daughters, interspersed with accusations of abandonment.
- 32 As the youngest child, Greg was largely an observer to these battles. That ended when first Angie moved out of the house, and then Tammy followed her in the summer of 1991. "That's when everything with my mom went from tense but manageable to sheer hell," Greg said. "I remember this one day when Tammy was moving out. She and Mom were fighting again, and I was kind of off in a corner smirking about it, and Tammy turned to me: 'Don't laugh, because it's all going to fall on you now. You're it.' And, man, was she right."
- 33 Given the small statistical pool from which to draw, the few scholarly studies devoted to juvenile parricide all come with an implied asterisk. But criminologists have isolated a set of characteristics that are likely to be found in the killer's home. Not all of these markers were present in the Ousley house — Greg was neither physically nor sexually abused, for example — but others certainly were: family strife; social isolation. Perhaps most intriguing are those things often absent from such households: juvenile delinquency on the part of the killer and a history of police intervention with the family, both of which were absent from the Ousley home.
- 34 With his sisters gone from the house, 12-year-old Greg was suddenly burdened with perhaps the most significant parricidal marker of all: a recent event that has made the child/killer the central focus of the parents' abuse and/or attention. Within months of Tammy's departure, Greg began telling a seventh-grade friend that he was going to kill his parents.

- 35 Tony Phillips is a science teacher and coach at Whitko Middle School and an Air Force veteran. He exudes that calm, slightly stern manner that certain troubled kids gravitate toward as a sign of stability and strength. As in other schools across the country, teachers at Whitko find that much of their time is taken up dealing with problems that have little to do with education (“We don’t teach anymore,” Phillips commented on several occasions, “we parent”), and they have become adept at looking for the bruises or body language that might indicate abuse or turmoil in the home. The number of children that Phillips has helped in such situations over the years is a source of pride to him.
- 36 “Sometimes you have to push a little,” he said, “because kids this age aren’t that communicative. But show you genuinely care, and they’ll usually crack right open.”
- 37 Phillips might be especially vigilant in this regard because of what he sees as his failure with one particular student two decades ago. From the autumn of 1990 until February 1993, he was Greg’s coach and teacher. Fourteen years after the murders, Phillips remained so troubled by his experience with Greg that he finally took a day off from Whitko to make the 90-minute drive out to Westville to see him.
- 38 “I think I was hoping for the golden key, so to speak,” he told me. “What didn’t I see? Was there something I didn’t pick up on that could have prevented it?”
- 39 Phillips first encountered Greg at the beginning of sixth grade, and he remembers him as a bright, polite student. Among the extended clan scattered around the Pierceton area, Ousley boys had a reputation for being star athletes, but Greg had little interest in baseball and was absolutely useless in basketball, *the* sport in Indiana. With some coaxing, though, Phillips managed to steer him into wrestling, where the small but lithe sixth grader proved something of a standout.
- 40 By the beginning of seventh grade, though, Greg’s interest in sports had waned, and he was frequently making elaborate excuses to avoid practice. He had started to wear his hair in a mullet and donned the black garb of his favorite heavy-metal bands. To Phillips, none of this was cause for alarm. “Kids at this age are constantly redefining themselves, and what their friends think is more important than anything else,” he said. “So sure, Greg had become more standoffish, he’d decided sports were a waste of time, but what did that mean?”
- 41 What Phillips couldn’t see was that Greg’s behavior masked a rapidly deteriorating home life, where he was now the sole focus of his mother’s rages. Almost daily, Greg told me, his mother would rip into him about something — his grades, his appearance, his choice of friends — ferocious tirades that often culminated in her telling him, “I know you’re going to leave me just like your sisters did.” Once her anger passed, Bonnie would usually apologize to her son, but after a time Greg didn’t even hear it anymore.
- 42 “I just knew it was going to happen all over again tomorrow, so what did it mean?” he said.
- 43 At the same time, he was becoming increasingly convinced that his father’s remoteness was less a sign of disinterest in him than outright disgust: disgust in his physical appearance, disgust in his lack of athletic prowess. Indicative of this, at least in Greg’s mind, was Jobie’s reaction when

Greg ran away from home in the fall of 1991 and sought refuge with his sister Angie, who lived 10 miles down the road.

44 “My dad came in his pickup truck to get me,” Greg recalled, “opened the passenger door — ‘Get in’ — and that was it. The whole way home, not another word. It was like he didn’t even care enough to be mad at me.”

45 The process by which a disturbed individual moves from generalized despair or anger toward a plan of action is known in the mental-health community as ideation, and by the spring of 1992, Greg was displaying clear signs of it. On one occasion, while his mother hung laundry in the backyard, he took a rifle down from the gun cabinet and aimed it at her head, imagining what would happen if he pulled the trigger. He quickly put the gun away, terrified by his own thoughts.

46 Equally ominous, from a psychological standpoint, was when he decided he needed a more convincing reason to get out of wrestling practice than the excuses he was trading in. His solution was to shoot himself in the foot. Instead of destroying his foot, the antique rifle backfired, leaving him with an intermittent ringing in one ear.

47 Perhaps hastening this ideation process, Greg and his friends had begun getting high, which for 12-year-olds in rural Indiana often meant turning to inhalants: gasoline, paint thinner, model glue. Huffing is well known to cause brain damage in adolescents, and among his group of Whitko pals, Greg quickly developed the reputation of a hard-core huffer.

48 “He’d do anything he could get his hands on,” said his former best friend, Chancy. “I remember him once taking WD-40 and huffing that.”

49 In the early summer of 1992, something occurred that compounded the pressures mounting on the troubled 13-year-old boy. Walking into the family garage one afternoon, he found his mother in a kissing embrace with his father’s best friend. For a time, Greg kept the knowledge to himself: when he finally confronted his mother, she tearfully admitted to the kiss but insisted there was nothing more to it. When Bonnie refused to tell Jobie, as Greg demanded she do, the boy saw that he was stuck, that his father now might very well blame him for having withheld the information from him for so long. Stuck, but also handed a potential weapon. Greg told his mother that if she didn’t get off his back and let him do as he pleased, he would tell his father about “the affair.”

50 “Basically I blackmailed her,” Greg explained. “I know it was an awful thing to do — I knew it even then — but it worked. All of sudden, I felt like I could breathe again, that now I had this escape hatch.”

51 But the episode also marked a turning point in Greg’s relationship with his parents. Whatever respect he still held for them was now gone; his mother was no longer just a “bitch” but a “whore,” his father a clueless cuckold. All manageable, perhaps, as long as Greg could run free, but then on Feb. 20, 1993, the escape hatch slammed shut. In the face of another of his

blackmailing demands, Bonnie called her son's bluff; if Greg wanted to tell his father about the illicit kiss in the garage, he could go ahead.

52 “And that was it,” he recalled. “All I could see was that it was going to be like this forever. Well, at least until I got out of high school and left home, but that was four and a half more years away, so it might as well have been forever.”

53 Over the next week, Greg planned his parents' murder and told his best friend that it was coming soon. Days before the killings, his thoughts had become so consuming, and so frightening, that he made that last, missed overture to his mother. Two days later, during his third-period study hall, he opened his school notebook and [penned a message](#). “This weekend,” it began, “I am going to kill my parents.”

54 Yet in Greg's mental reconstruction, even at this late date, there remained one last chance for the whole plan to be scuttled. It came on that Friday afternoon when he shouted an obscenity at his girlfriend and Tony Phillips stopped him. After scolding the eighth grader for using such language at school, Phillips detained Greg long enough to ask what was going on with him.

55 “I almost told him right then,” Greg said. “If he or anyone else had just pushed me a little bit more, because I was so upset and scared by what was about to happen, I just know I would've crumbled right there.”

56 Instead, Greg gave the stock response of most every 14-year-old boy — “nothing” — and the moment passed.

57 It is this account that Greg related to Phillips on that day in 2007 when his former teacher showed up at Westville hoping to discover the “golden key.” And it is the same account, if more detailed, that he told Phillips and me in November 2009 when we went to Westville together. During the drive back to Kosciusko County after that meeting, Phillips was quiet for a very long time. “You know what's the scariest aspect to all this?” he finally said. “I don't remember that conversation at all. Ever since Greg told me about it, I've racked my brain trying to remember, but I just can't.”

58 For the long-term prisoner, hope is a tricky property, something that needs to be constantly monitored and managed. Bereft of it, the inmate can quickly descend into a state of apathetic despair and turn to the fast-at-hand reliefs — drug use, gang allegiance — that all but ensure his stay will be lengthened. But to nurture out too much hope is to invite repeated and crushing disappointment, which can be just a slower way to get to the same place. The proper balance, it seems, is to work toward a goal — reconciliation with a family member, winning a legal appeal — while constantly reminding yourself that it probably won't happen.

59 At Westville, Greg is allowed to call people on an approved contact list, and after my first visit in 2009 we began staying in touch through weekly hourlong phone conversations. His calls invariably came at precisely the scheduled time, but on those occasions when I was unable to pick up, Greg shrugged off the lost opportunity with equanimity. “No problem,” he would say the following week. “I know you've got other things going on.”

60 Through his first few years in prison, Greg’s fear alone acted as something of a distraction, the time eased by occasional visits from his sisters and their young children. Then things became routine, the visits stopped and the enormity of what lay ahead — a minimum of 28 years if he did everything just right; he’d be a man in his 40s when he got out — gradually dawned on him. Greg remembers those as the very worst years, a period when he occasionally turned to prison dope and moonshine for brief relief and when he got written up a number of times for minor infractions.

61 During this period, though, he set out on a painful journey of self-examination, trying to understand what he had done and why. One of the crueler paradoxes of his situation is that if he had been remanded into Indiana’s juvenile justice system, Greg would have received help in this process; Indiana places an emphasis on youthful offenders’ undergoing intensive behavioral and psychological therapy as a way for them to understand their actions and, it’s hoped, correct their course in the future.

62 But Greg entered an adult system where whatever psychological counseling existed was primarily geared toward helping an inmate cope with his incarceration, not examining how he got there in the first place. Going it alone, Greg began putting his thoughts to paper. His first effort, a 40-page handwritten essay begun when he was 19, took him 15 months to write and was titled, “[Why I Killed My Parents.](#)”

63 “For a long time,” he wrote, “I searched for the reason of why I did what I did, and today I am finding it. Although there are other things that I remember, but don’t know how to explain yet, basically it all comes down to one thing: acceptance. In my case, it was not being accepted by my parents for trying to be myself.”

64 Six years later, at 25, he embarked on a far more mature and pained effort, keeping a journal in which he frequently addressed passages directly to his dead parents. That journal coincided not only with his pursuit of a bachelor’s degree but with something else, as well. It is one of the few aspects of his life Greg is reluctant to discuss, but it seems to hold the key to his fortitude. “I’ve never been particularly religious,” he told me during one of our visits, “and I’ve never really fallen for all that mystical stuff, but I had these two different dreams, about three months apart, where first my father and then my mother came to me. They were so vivid, lifelike, and for the first time since it happened, I could hear their voices, see their faces. And they forgave me. They hugged me, and forgave me for what I did.” Greg paused and kneaded his fingers. “People might think that I’m just letting myself off the hook, but after that, everything changed. I still have the guilt, but I truly believe they have forgiven me, and that’s kind of allowed me to move on, to think about what comes next because I feel that’s what they want now.”

65 In Greg’s memory, it was the best night he ever spent with his parents.

66 He made plans to spend that Saturday night at Chancy’s house, but that day, Greg was confronted by his parents and admitted pocketing the deposit for a canceled school trip and using the money to buy guitar strings for his father’s old guitar. He called Chancy with the news that he was grounded but said he would sneak over later that night once his parents were asleep. The day took an unusual turn when Jobie told Greg to bring out the guitar strings, and father and son

together restring the guitar. Later, as Greg sat strumming in the family room, Jobie came in and briefly listened to him play.

67 “My father said, ‘Wow, you’re pretty good,’ ” Greg recalled. “It was weird, because I couldn’t think of the last time he’d complimented me about anything.”

68 Jobie took up the guitar and taught his son a few chords of an old bluegrass favorite. The two were joined by Bonnie, and for the next several hours, Greg and his parents sat in the family room singing and playing together.

69 “It was so strange,” Greg said, “because this had just never, ever happened before. It was almost like. . . .” He groped for the right words “I don’t know, like on some level he knew, like he was trying to make amends or head it off somehow.”

70 At about 10:30, Jobie and Bonnie went to bed. For the next hour, Greg sat on the couch and stared at the television — it was tuned to an old-movie channel, he recalled, though he has no memory of what was playing — and tried to find a reason to not go through with it. On the one hand, maybe that evening was a sign of better times to come. But weighted against this was a concern so perverse that only an adolescent mind might come up with it: already having a reputation among his friends as a liar, he was sure that if he didn’t do this now, no one would ever believe him about anything again. At about 11:30, he rose from the couch and made for the gun cabinet.

71 Around 4 a.m., Chloe and Michael Neer, the Ousleys’ closest neighbors, were awakened by a frantic pounding on their front door. It was Greg.

72 “He was saying, ‘My mother’s been killed, someone’s killed my mother,’ ” Chloe Neer remembers. Greg was friends with Chloe’s three sons, and after she called 911, she went to hug the sobbing boy. “And as soon as I did, I knew he’d done it,” she told me. “I can’t explain why — a mother’s intuition, I guess — but I just knew.”

73 A 12-gauge slug fired from close range inflicts horrific damage on a human body, and the two that killed Bonnie Ousley — one to her right side, the other to the back of her head — struck with such force that blood and tissue were sprayed on the ceiling and a wall nearly 20 feet away. Police officers found a similarly gory scene in the master bedroom where Jobie lay dead.

74 While one aspect of Greg’s story checked out — that he had gone to see his friend Chancy that night — it was just about all that did. Shortly after daybreak, he was transported to the Kosciusko County sheriff’s office in downtown Warsaw, where the authorities faced a legal wrinkle. Under Indiana law, minors can waive their Miranda rights only with parental consent, but with Greg’s parents dead, it meant a legal guardian had to be appointed before the boy could be interviewed. Among the relatives who gathered outside the Ousley household that morning, one of the most distraught was Bonnie’s sister; to several officers, she made a comment that she had lost the only family she had left. At the sheriff’s office, authorities quickly moved to make her and her husband Greg’s guardians, an arrangement that all parties agreed to.

- 75 The county sheriff was nervous enough about the legality of this maneuver — in Indiana, guardianship can be conferred only by the courts, and no judge had been anywhere near this case yet — that he ordered investigators to halt their questioning. It soon became a moot point, however. By noon, the police had found the notebook in which Greg wrote of killing his parents, and his friend Chancy had related Greg’s account of the killings, details that precisely matched up with the murder scene. Shortly after 3 p.m., Greg broke down and confessed.
- 76 Two days later, Greg was taken into court for a hearing on whether his case should be routed into the adult legal system. His court-appointed lawyer might have asked for a preliminary psychiatric examination, a procedure that would have at least slowed the process down, but he declined to do so. He might have also asserted that the presence of premeditation — the prosecutor’s chief argument for taking it to adult court — was a particularly poor standard in the context of juvenile parricide; given the physical and psychological power imbalance inherent in child-parent relationships, a not uncommon feature to such murders is premeditation. He declined to do that as well. And so in a single 20-minute hearing held less than 72 hours after the murders, it was decided that the 14-year-old would stand as an adult.
- 77 Having accepted a plea agreement of guilty but mentally ill, Greg appeared for his sentencing hearing in early January 1994. A panel of three psychological examiners hired by the defense unanimously argued against simple incarceration, urging instead for “treatment which would deal with the traumas and deficiencies noted in his development.”
- 78 Daniel Hampton, the Kosciusko County deputy prosecutor (he declined to be interviewed for this article), argued for a severe penalty. “Greg,” he stated, “will eventually set an example for other juveniles.”
- 79 Greg was sentenced to two consecutive 30-year prison terms.
- 80 In 2009, letters were sent by Greg’s lawyer to Greg’s two sisters and five aunts and uncles asking their views on his modification petition. Of the six relatives who replied, five were in favor of early release, but one, his mother’s sister, was opposed. Greg got the bad news in the form of a letter from the prosecutor, Daniel Hampton: “It is on that basis that the State of Indiana will be objecting to any modification in this case.”
- 81 When Greg next called, I expected him to be morose. Instead, he was remarkably upbeat. “So maybe it doesn’t all come together the first time out,” he said, “but this starts the process, and eventually it will. I have to believe that. I’ve gone too far to lose hope now.”
- 82 In fact, he had come up with another idea: a family mediation session. His vision was for a kind of family reunion inside the prison walls, a chance for all his relatives to sit and ask him anything they wanted, to vent, to curse him, whatever.
- 83 “Even the ones who said, ‘Yeah, sure, let him out,’ I’d like them to come,” he said in one of our phone calls. “I want them to see I’m not the crazy 14-year-old kid they remember, because one of the problems here is that I’m frozen in time to them. I need for them to see what I’ve become.” He paused. “And I hope [my aunt] comes, too. I really don’t blame her for opposing

my release — I took away the most important person in her life — but if I’ve learned one thing from all this, it’s that you can’t keep things bottled up. Even if it doesn’t sway her one bit, I think it’d help her to see my face.”

84 It took over a year to organize the mediation session. Part of the delay was because Greg was transferred from Westville to another medium-security prison, Miami Correctional Facility, about an hour north of Indianapolis. Another obstacle was the difficulty finding the required outside mediator to officiate. One after another, those approached demurred or simply went silent once they heard the nature of Greg’s crimes. Finally Rick Russell, a family therapist living about an hour away from the prison, agreed to do it, and the mediation session was scheduled for mid-November 2010.

85 When the day arrived, only a single uncle, Jobie’s older brother Eddie, accompanied by his fourth wife, Patricia, made the journey to Miami. Prison visits always have an awkward, forced quality to them, and so it was with the mediation session, the five of us — Greg and Rick Russell, Eddie and Patricia and me — arrayed in a semicircle in a large visitation hall, two prison guards keeping watch from a respectful distance.

86 Greg was intensely anxious in the days leading up to the meeting — he hadn’t seen Eddie since immediately after the murders — and he prepared a kind of soliloquy for the occasion, an accounting of all that had brought him to that awful day. Five or six minutes into the speech, though, it proved too much, and Greg fell apart and began to sob. Russell intervened and advised him to take his time, to let the conversation wander where it wanted to go. Soon the conversation settled into an easier rhythm, one in which the grim recollections were interspersed with happier reminiscences.

87 At one point, while talking about Jobie’s aloofness even when they were kids, Eddie said, “If you could get two words out of Jobie, you were doing real well.” Then he told Greg: “He was proud of you. I know, because he used to brag on you to me. Problem was, he just didn’t know how to express it.”

88 This came to Greg with the force of revelation, appearing to please and sadden him simultaneously. He described that last night with his parents, came to the part where his father took up his old guitar. “He tried to teach me the chords to this old bluegrass song, really pretty song, and all these years I’ve been trying to remember what it was. It kind of went like this.” Greg looked at the group and hummed a few bars.

89 “ ‘Wildwood Flower,’ ” Eddie said, grinning. “Our father used to play it all the time.” And for the next few moments, he and Greg sat humming the tune together.

90 I returned to the prison the next day and met with Greg alone. He was emotionally exhausted from the experience and was focused on getting some photographs of his parents that Eddie promised to send.

91 “I’ve only ever had this one photo of them,” he said, “but you can’t see their eyes in it, so I feel like I can’t really remember what they look like. I just really want to be able to see their eyes.”

- 92 When those photos arrived, though, Greg was devastated. “I have only been able to look at them a few times [since] the night I received them,” he wrote to me in an e-mail. “I feel pretty bad, man. It has me feeling all kinds of screwed-up things. Just seeing my parents and really seeing them as real people. I mean there are pictures in there from the early ’80s. They were all happy. We were all happy.”
- 93 Shortly after that, Greg went quiet for a long time. When our contact resumed, the weekly phone calls became monthly phone calls, my e-mails to him going unanswered for long stretches. “Sorry, man,” he offered, when I finally confronted him about it in a phone call, “I’ve just been really busy.”
- 94 “Busy? In prison?”
- 95 We shared a laugh — but a soft one lest the hypersensitive prison phone system cut us off.
- 96 Mark Sevier, a powerfully built man with close-cropped hair, is the superintendent of Miami Correctional. By coincidence, he was an inmate counselor in the winter of 1994 at Wabash Valley, the prison in southwestern Indiana where the 15-year-old Greg Ousley was sent to start serving his 60-year sentence. Sevier was assigned to his case.
- 97 “I remember when he came in,” Sevier told me. “He was just so young and little — and he’s not a big guy even now — but back then he was like, what, 130 pounds? It was like putting a baby in among all these grown men.”
- 98 Their new charge presented the Wabash Valley staff with a formidable challenge. All cells at Wabash were two-man units, and while Greg was slated to enter the general population, that population included nearly 200 maximum-security inmates. “We thought very carefully about who to put him in with,” Sevier recalled. “I think we also tapped some of the other guys on the block to watch out for him. It’s better now, because they’ve got a special unit down there to house all the under-age guys who’ve come in, but back then there was nothing like that.”
- 99 Despite his earlier intentions, Greg hasn’t had another family mediation session since the one in 2010 with his uncle Eddie. As grueling as that meeting was, he felt it helped him gain a new perspective on his parents, especially his father. He now suspects that what he interpreted in his father as disinterest, even disgust, more likely stemmed from a paralyzing self-consciousness. Jobie found solace from this torment by shutting himself away in his workshed.
- 100 That, and probably he was bone tired. “You know, my parents worked so damned hard,” Greg says, “and they were constantly being moved from one shift to another, so their sleep was always messed up. How much of it was maybe just that they were tired? Even that afternoon when I told my mom that I was scared, maybe it was, ‘O.K., I know this is important, but right at this moment, I just can’t deal.’ But when you’re 13, 14, everything’s about you, you don’t get any of that.”
- 101 Over the past two years, Greg’s isolation has eased. While he’s yet to be visited by his sisters, he is now in e-mail contact with them and regularly receives letters from two nieces. Chloe Neer,

his old neighbor in Pierceton, recently began visiting him in Miami. “I try to get down at least once a month,” she says.

102 As for winning an early release, Greg now knows that is very unlikely, unless there occurs some unforeseeable change of heart by his aunt or by the prosecutor, Daniel Hampton. At the end of my meeting with Sevier, he asked how much more time Greg had to serve. In prisons, both inmates and officers have a habit of thinking of doing time in terms of stamina, as if it were a long-distance race, and when I told Sevier seven years, he briefly pondered before giving a sharp nod.

103 “He can do that. He’s a strong guy.”

104 Strong or not, Greg’s case is a telling one in the national debate over just what is accomplished by sentencing juveniles to long prison sentences. In the case of juvenile parricide, there is an added paradox. Because it is among the most target-specific of crimes, criminologists believe that an abused juvenile who killed a parent is likely to be at low risk of future criminality if he gets treatment and has a strong social support system when he is released. Certainly society might recoil at the notion that a child who murders his parents should be “let off” by a juvenile detention that might end at 18 or 21, but attached to this is the question of when the thirst for punishment becomes counterproductive to all concerned. After all, Greg Ousley, like 95 percent of other prison inmates, is going to come out some day, and is it better for society that he do so when he’s in his 30s and still has the potential of patching together a somewhat-normal life, or not until his 40s when his options will be far more limited?

105 This debate seems a long way off in Kosciusko County. In April 2010, two young boys from a rural corner of the county, Colt Lundy, 15, and Paul Gingerich, 12, shot to death Lundy’s stepfather, Phillip Danner. Days later, at the urging of the county prosecutor, Daniel Hampton, the boys’ cases were waived into the adult system, where, facing up to 65 years in prison, both entered plea agreements. On Jan. 4, 2011, almost 17 years to the day that Greg Ousley was sentenced in the same county courthouse, Paul Gingerich was sentenced to 25 years. Considered by prison officials to be too vulnerable for even the youth as adults wing of Wabash Valley prison, Gingerich is currently being temporarily housed at a juvenile facility. He is the youngest adult inmate in Indiana.

[Scott Anderson](#) is a contributing writer to the magazine and the author of the novel “[Moonlight Hotel](#).” He is at work on a book about World War I.

Editor: [Joel Lovell](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on July 22, 2012, on page MM26 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: A Plea to Be Free.