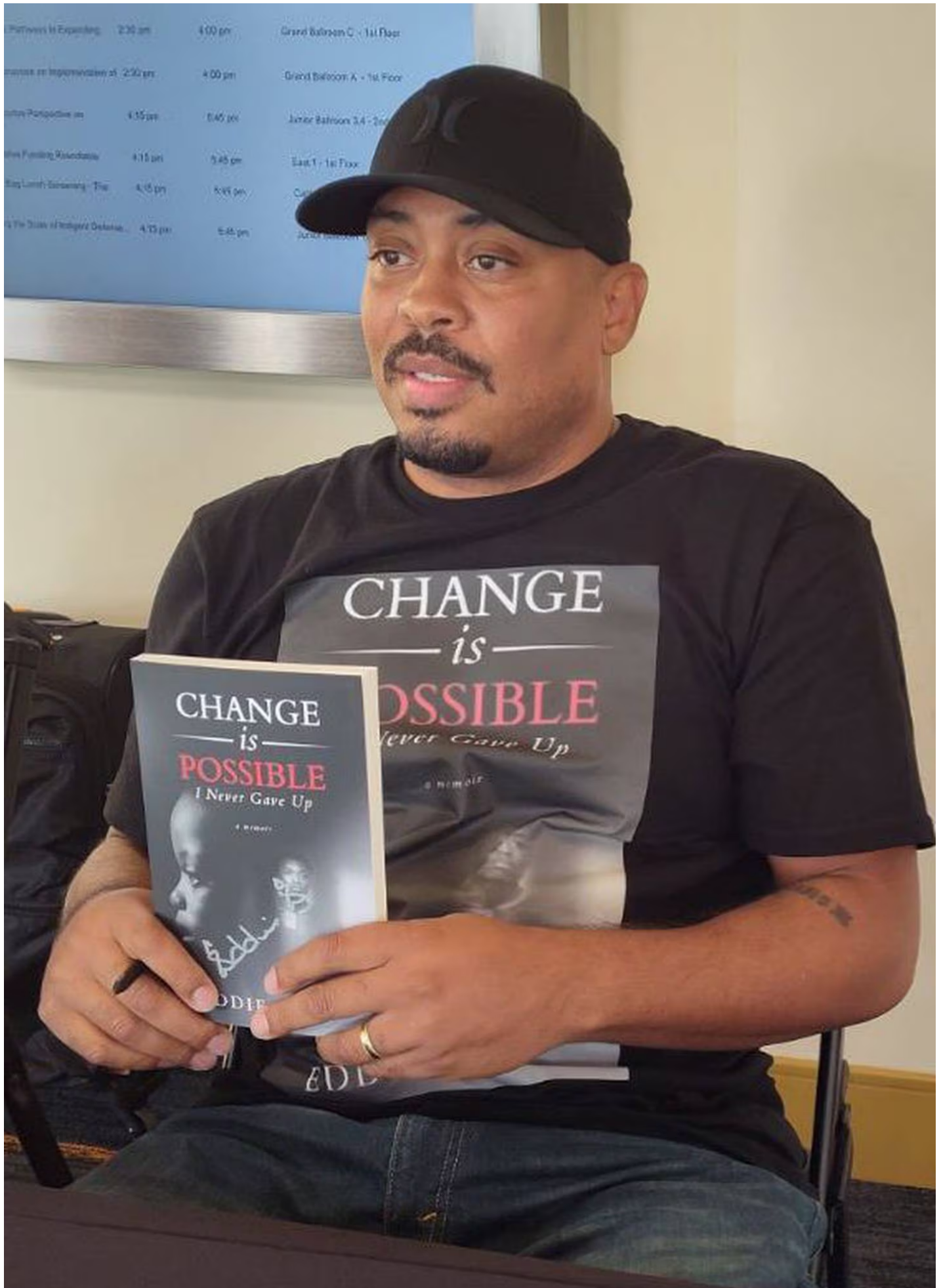


# **Commentary: Children with adult prison sentences can still make good**

Eddie Ellis

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Eddie Ellis is co-director of the Incarcerated Children's Advocacy Network. (Courtesy of Eddie Ellis)

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## Those condemned as children can reclaim their lives and find purpose in helping others who've met the same fate

Instead of walking through the doors of a Montgomery County high school, I was a teenager walking through prison gates. I was called a menace to society and told I deserved to die in prison. I spent a decade in solitary confinement.

Decades later, I'm now a husband, father and leader in community care initiatives. I stand among many others who, given a chance, have proven capable of leading a productive, fulfilling life.

I'm confident that children who have committed serious harm can still become positive members of society. As the co-director of the [Incarcerated Children's Advocacy Network \(ICAN\)](#), I've worked with hundreds of others with experiences like mine.

### More on the Juvenile Restoration Act

- ['It means everything:' How the Juvenile Restoration Act has provided a second chance for people sentenced as children to prison in Maryland](#)
- [Juvenile justice providers, advocates urge patience amid spike in some youth crimes](#)
- [Maryland leaders reassessing juvenile justice changes after several high-profile crimes](#)

ICAN is a group dedicated to accountability and healing. Its members, when they were children, received long prison sentences. Many of us were condemned to die there. Given a chance at freedom upon release, we have committed ourselves to using our freedom to break cycles of harm. We mentor youths across the country. We welcome those reentering society with community care. While many of us lacked a supportive network growing up, we're actively creating that for each other every day.

For our annual community care retreat this past summer, we gathered at a beautiful retreat center on the Maryland coast to share our community justice strategies with one another. We've been particularly concerned with ways to help young people thrive. While youth crime has gripped parts of this country, we see ourselves as part of the solution.

Shawnte Perry, for instance, has made herself part of the solution. She was 15 when she was sent to prison. Given a second chance at 40, she turned her reentry experience into a commitment to mentor young women and girls in addressing their traumas. She's now driven to help young people avoid making the same mistakes she did. Experiencing the transformative power of an advanced degree once she came home, she works at Goucher College, helping those currently incarcerated access their prison education program and making sure the students stay on track.

Another solutions-oriented individual is Earl Young. His violence prevention and victims' rights work earned him a certificate with the Baltimore Police Department. After serving 34 years of a life sentence after being imprisoned as a 17-year-old, he's become [an admired youth counselor in his community](#). Earl's motto for the young people he mentors through the Mayor's Office of African American Male Engagement is "[you are my priority](#)," and his support continues to be life-changing for young people in Baltimore. Last year, a kid he worked closely with through the [squeegee collaborative](#) received a full ride to college.

Alonzo Turner-Bey, who was also incarcerated for more than 31 years while serving a life sentence received as a child, created an organization while in prison called POSITIVE C.H.A.N.G.E: Positive Citizens Helping a New

Generation Evolve. Now home, Alonzo continues that work as a peer support specialist, working with young people and returning citizens through a local county government agency in Prince George's County. This year, his volunteer work with a nonprofit [supporting young people](#) with food, clothing, education and mentorship in the community he once harmed — and is now committed to healing.

As members of ICAN, we want to give kids the very things we needed when we were kids. We may have been condemned as children decades ago, but our freedom is allowing us to commit to the kids of today. While lengthy sentences [do not deter youths from making devastating decisions](#) such as the ones we made, Shawnte, Earl, Alonzo and other trusted members do.

A year after Alonzo was released, Maryland passed the [Juvenile Restoration Act](#), giving more people incarcerated as children the opportunity to be a solution in their communities. The law created a compassionate pathway for these children to demonstrate their transformation to a sentencing review board after serving at least 20 years in prison. Acceptance of the act was informed by public safety outcomes of similar policies in other states that reported a recidivism rate of [1.14%](#). In passing the new law, Maryland took to heart evidence about adolescent brain development, and we took seriously the racial injustices experienced by life-sentenced children. Before the law was enacted, Maryland [led the nation](#) in the incarceration rate of Black children, [with 87% of those serving life sentences being Black](#).

Maryland had already experienced formerly incarcerated individuals becoming effective change agents for community safety. With the Juvenile Restoration Act, communities can continue to benefit from these committed individuals. Maryland's leaders must stand ready to reaffirm our values in redemption, hope, healing and the belief that [change is possible](#), especially for our young people.

*Eddie Ellis is the author of "[Change is Possible: Never Give Up](#)" and the co-director of outreach and member services at the [Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth](#), where he coordinates the Incarcerated Children's Advocacy Network (ICAN).*

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