

MERCY FOR CHRISTA: THE CASE FOR LIFE

Think back to the worst mistake you made as a reckless teenager. Well, mine happened to be huge, unforgettable and ruined countless lives. I was a mentally ill 18-year-old kid. It took me numerous years to even realize the gravity of what I'd done. Even more to accept how many lives I affected. I took the life of someone's child, sister, friend. It sickens me now to think I had the ability to commit such a crime.

Christa Pike

Christa Pike was just 18 years old when she and two others killed Colleen Slemmer. Long before that day, Christa was a child who had endured repeated rape, sexual abuse, abandonment, and profound trauma. By the time of the crime, she bore the scars of this violence, neglect, and untreated mental illness. These realities do not excuse what happened. But they are essential to understanding how such an unimaginable act became possible and how profoundly adults and institutions failed to support a child in desperate need.

Today, Christa is 50 years old. She doesn't expect to walk free. Yet after over 30 years in prison, with consistent treatment, medication, and decades of reflection, she accepts responsibility, expresses sincere, deep remorse, and continues to work toward becoming someone who can help others. Through this petition, Christa respectfully asks Governor Bill Lee to grant her clemency by commuting her sentence to life without the possibility of parole. Christa can still be useful. Her story of growth from a traumatized teenager to a generous, empathetic woman has the power to help others choose a different path. It already has.

Christa Today: A Remorseful Woman Who Stewards Other Inmates

Christa's world has been framed by the small, waist-high opening in the door of her 8' x 10' cell for more than twenty-nine years. From 1998 to 2024, Christa was held in

solitary confinement¹ and, with few exceptions, her interactions with the world came through the air conditioning vents in her cell or through that pie flap. Christa was only touched when she was being shackled, or on the rare occasions when she was allowed to hug her family. Since September 2024, Christa has been allowed to work within her pod and interact with other inmates. She has cherished this opportunity. Although Christa's surroundings have changed very little during her incarceration, Christa has changed significantly. Christa has become a lifeline for other inmates.

Marcy Graves' daughter, Teddy, became addicted to prescription drugs after being diagnosed with a serious heart condition. After Teddy was arrested, the Houston County jail transferred her to the women's prison as a safekeeper because it could not accommodate her health condition. Teddy was housed in Unit 3, just across from Christa. Marcy was terrified that her daughter was held next to Christa, whose case and crime details Marcy had followed. She thought Christa was evil. Marcy worried for her timid and small daughter—Teddy had never been in trouble before. Marcy warned Teddy to stay away from Christa.

As Teddy was escorted to the shower the first time, she heard Christa's voice coming through her pie flap, "You better not get in that shower with no shower shoes, girl!" A few minutes later, an officer handed Teddy a new pair of shower shoes. "Love, Christa Pike" was written in sharpie on the sole. Marcy was still frightened and worried. She wrote Christa a thank you note, hoping that her gratefulness would touch Christa in some way and make things easier for Teddy. Christa wrote back. As Teddy waited three months to

¹ Read more about Christa's solitary confinement and its repercussions in Christa Endured Solitary Confinement for Nearly 3 Decades.

receive a property package with clothing and other necessities, Christa helped Teddy obtain what she needed. She even gave the officers her own radio, headphones, pencils, and paper to bring to Teddy to help her pass the time. If Teddy was sick, Christa would advocate for her until the officers got a nurse to attend to Teddy.

Marcy had only seen how the media portrayed Christa. She learned Christa's true nature through the letters Marcy and Christa began to write regularly. Christa helped Teddy through her time on Unit 3 and has helped Marcy through her own difficulties, Teddy's release from prison, and Teddy's death. Marcy and Christa became friends and talked often. Christa named the chickens on Marcy's farm and painted pictures of mermaids for Marcy's home. This is how Marcy now describes Christa, the person she once feared:

"This woman Christa gave all she had to give to a perfect stranger who was scared, sick and alone in a very scary place. Christa loved, befriended, fed, clothed, and cared for my child when I could not reach her. She eased my heart, the heart of a terrified, worried mother.

Christa is a beautiful soul who did a really bad thing when she was very young.... She is not that person anymore."²

Teddy is not the only woman Christa has helped. Over and over, new, vulnerable women arrive on Unit 3 and Christa comforts them and meets their basic needs. She has provided toiletries, hygiene products, paper, and food to innumerable new arrivals. Ashlee Sellars was one of those women.³ She was transferred into the adult system as a teenager in 1995 and received a letter from Christa. She had never met Christa and was unfamiliar

² See Marcy Graves letter, p. 3, and Marcy Graves Video.

³ See "A Second Chance at LIFE: Ashlee Sellars; Former TPW resident uses education and experience to work in restorative justice with youth." <https://lipscomb.edu/news/second-chance-life-ashlee-sellars> (May 14, 2019).

with her story. Christa's letter offered encouragement. She told her, "Don't be afraid, there are people who will look out for you." She and Christa were housed near each other for a time. They would kneel at their pie flaps and talk.

Christa is at her core a lover of people. She hasn't always had that same love, that same model.⁴

Since 1995, public perception of Christa and her crime has been frozen in time. Local and national media covered Christa's trial in the midst of the "Satanic Panic" of the 1990s. The same fevered atmosphere that led to the wrongful convictions of the West Memphis 3 pervaded Christa's trial. In truth, it was Christa's abusive boyfriend and co-defendant, Tadaryl Shipp, who was fascinated by satanic imagery.⁵ The press focused on the salacious parts of Christa's crime, disregarding the context of her youth, trauma, and mental illness.

Christa's own actions did not help. An immature teenager, described by her trial lawyer as less emotionally mature than his 10-year-old daughter,⁶ Christa sometimes appeared to enjoy the notoriety she was experiencing. This inaccurate appearance, coupled with her misguided loyalty to Shipp, fed the perception that Christa lacked remorse and humanity; that she was evil.

A Child with Unimaginable Wounds

In advocating for enactment of the recent child rape capital punishment bill, House Majority Leader William Lamberth read a letter he received from a victim: "I am a victim

⁴ To hear more from Ashlee about her experience with Christa and why she believes Christa is deserving of mercy, watch the Ashlee Sellars video.

⁵ Co-defendants Tadaryl Shipp and Shadolla Peterson, like Christa and Colleen Slemmer, were residents of the Knoxville Job Corps in January 1995. Peterson received a sentence of time served and probation and Shipp was sentenced to life with possibility of parole.

⁶ See William Talman letter, p. 1.

of child sexual abuse. The wounds are unimaginable and the scars run deep. These are not crimes that victims are able to heal from or move on with their lives. These crimes change children forever. Some things can never be gained, once lost.”

Christa’s crime cannot be understood without understanding the extraordinary trauma she had suffered as a child and the untreated mental illness that dictated her behavior. As trauma expert Dr. Bethany Brand concluded when she met with Christa in 2023:

Christa Pike’s life demonstrates the tragic and life-long consequences of growing up with constant abuse, violence, and abandonment, with no protection. Decades of being brutally raped, molested, beaten, humiliated, emotionally abused, ostracized and screamed at profoundly damaged her, leaving her with a multitude of untreated psychological disorders.... At 18 years old, her immature, traumatized brain made her exceptionally vulnerable to impulses and extremely poor decisions. Unmedicated and untreated, she was not able to put the “brakes on” her bipolar- and trauma-triggered emotions.⁷

Dr. Brand’s examination of Christa revealed that she experienced 9 out of 10 adverse childhood experiences, or “ACEs”.⁸ Each childhood adversity significantly

⁷ Dr. Bethany Brand Report, p. 39, in 10. Other Supporting Materials For a deeper discussion of Christa’s history of mental illness and trauma, *see* Christa Has Suffered from Bipolar Disorder and PTSD Since Childhood, and Christa Suffered Horrific Sexual Violence That Began When She Was a Toddler. Also, hear directly from Dr. Brand in the clemency video.

⁸ Dr. Brand identified the following 9 ACEs that Christa experienced as a child:

- (1) Verbal/Emotional Abuse. Two of Christa’s mother’s boyfriends (Danny Thompson, Steve Kyaw) verbally abused her, as did her maternal grandmother and father.
- (2) Physical Abuse. Christa’s mother sometimes physically abused her. However, her father often physically abused her, as well as did her maternal grandmother, her sister, Danny Thompson, and Steve Kyaw.
- (3) Sexual Abuse. Steve Kyaw sexually abused her. Additionally, she was exposed to numerous severe sexual assaults from individuals who did not live in the home. One of the men who raped her as a youth lived within sight of her home and she had to often walk past his trailer; the possibility that he would attack her again utterly terrified her.
- (4) Emotional Neglect. Christa was often overlooked, unprotected, and disbelieved about having been sexually assaulted and mistreated by a babysitter and various partners of her mother.

increases a person's risk for medical and mental disturbances decades later. Individuals with four or more ACEs show a notably higher risk for a range of medical and mental disorders.

It is highly unusual for a child to experience nine ACEs: ***Christa experienced more ACEs than 99.3% of the U.S. population.*** Brand Report, p. 22. Many adults in Christa's life mistreated and abused her in a multitude of ways. *Id.* Her home was not a place of safety, protection, and belonging for Christa, it was the very source of her chaos and danger. This was an extremely heavy burden of adversity for Christa as a child. *Id.* High levels of ACEs are linked to memory difficulties (i.e., dissociation), depression, anxiety, panic, sleep disturbance, headaches, early sexual intercourse, many sexual partners, difficulty controlling anger, early smoking, heavy drinking, and drug use. *Id.* "Christa suffers from every one of these outcomes." *Id.* Christa's psychological disorders, her past difficulty controlling her angry outbursts and behavior, and past drug use stemmed from the tragic level of sexual and physical abuse and family chaos she was exposed to as a child. *Id.*

(5) Physical Neglect. Christa often did not have enough to eat when she lived with her mother. She was often sent to school without breakfast or lunch money. She had to wear dirty clothes when at her mother's home. Furthermore, her mother was often too drunk to take care of her.

(6) Parental Separation or Divorce. Christa's parents married, then divorced, then remarried each other, and finally were divorced a second time.

(7) Household Member With Problem Drinking or Drug Use. Christa's mother, father, and maternal grandmother drank heavily and/or used drugs.

(8) Household Member With Mental Health Problems. Christa's mother became so depressed after Christa's birth that she attempted suicide.

(9) Witnessing violence between her parents.

Christa's mother Carissa⁹ drank and got high while pregnant with Christa. Carissa worked the evening shift on a psychiatric unit. One evening a patient threw Carissa through some double swinging doors, and she landed on a supply cart. She began leaking amniotic fluid and Christa was born prematurely via emergency Caesarean section. Christa was born blue and was on a respirator for a week after birth, remaining at the hospital for two weeks. She was born with a hyaline membrane and hip dysplasia and required extended medical treatment for the first year of her life. Carissa became extremely depressed after giving birth to Christa and tried to kill herself. Carissa's own mental health struggles did not allow her to appropriately care for Christa or protect her from abuse.

Carissa worked obsessively, going back to work just three weeks after Christa's birth. She worked from 9 am to midnight Monday through Friday and took another 12-hour shift on weekends. Carissa believes she only took twelve (12) days off during Christa's first year. Christa's father, Glenn Pike, a Vietnam War Army veteran who had been exposed to Agent Orange, rarely worked and drank heavily.

Carrie Ross,¹⁰ Christa's aunt, described coming to visit and finding toddler Christa crawling around on the floor among piles of dog stool all over the house. She described Carissa's home as filthy with dirty dishes piled everywhere. As Christa got older, Carrie would sometimes bring her and her older sister, Alicia, to her home so that they could have

⁹ In the last year, Christa's mother Carissa and stepfather Gerard (who Christa referred to as her "real dad") have died, just months apart. Carissa succumbed to cancer in November 2025 and Gerard had a heart attack, fell, and incurred a brain bleed. Christa's biological father, Emil Glenn Pike, died in 2024. All three wrote letters to Governor Lee which can be found in Letter Supporting Mercy.

¹⁰ See Carrie Ross Video.

a meal. She explained that Carissa was often neglectful of the girls, spending money on clothing for herself to go out partying, while the girls often did not have adequate clothing or food. When Christa was a toddler, Carrie and Carissa were at a bar one night while Zola,¹¹ Christa's grandmother, babysat Christa. Christa began having a seizure. Zola called the bar to tell them, but Carissa wanted to stay at the bar, saying Christa would be fine. Carrie insisted that they go home and take Christa to the hospital. Christa's EEG was abnormal, and she was diagnosed with a seizure disorder at age 14 months.¹²

Childhood Rapes and Sexual Abuse

Christa lived with Delfa, her paternal grandmother, for much of the time she was a toddler. Despite her daughter Pearl's warnings,¹³ Delfa frequently left Christa alone with her boyfriend, Ernest Johnson, who began sexually abusing Christa before she could walk and talk up until kindergarten. He orally raped her. He ensured Christa's silence by threatening to kill Christa's beloved pets and her grandmother. Ernest intimidated and tortured Christa, locking her in a dark chicken coop where spiders crawled on her and bit her. Ernest was an alcoholic who drank all day and would send Delfa out of the home to buy his alcohol.

¹¹ Zola was Christa's maternal grandmother. She verbally and physically abused Christa. She was also an alcoholic and died of cirrhosis of the liver.

¹² Neurologist Dr. Jonathan Pincus explained in post-conviction that the EEG results showed high voltage spikes coming from the right frontal temporal lobe and indicated damage there. *See* Testimony of Jonathan Pincus, p. 240. He explained that these results pointed to a heterotopia in that region of Christa's brain, which was corroborated with an MRI scan in which the brain damage was visible to the naked eye. *Id.*, p. 244–45. The visibility of the damage implies much more extensive and networked damage through Christa's brain that would not be visible on an MRI. *Id.* In addition, Dr. Pincus's physical examination revealed damage to the basal ganglia at the center of her brain. Dr. Pincus attributed the frontal lobe brain damage to Carissa's drinking while Christa was in utero. *Id.*, p. 242.

¹³ *See* Pearl and Duane Poling video.

As Christa told Dr. Brand, “They figured out I was being abused because I was drawing pictures” at elementary school. The teacher asked the class to draw what they did at home. Christa drew a man with “a huge penis and demon face.” Brand Report, p.10. Christa was taken to the principal and her parents were called, but no one investigated this red flag indicating ongoing sexual abuse. *Id.*¹⁴

Throughout her childhood, Christa was a victim of violent predators with no protection from her mother and absent, uninvolved father. Glenn had affairs with other women during his marriages to Carissa. At one point he stole the family dog from his daughters to give to one of his girlfriends, precipitating the final divorce from Christa’s mother when Christa was six years old.

At age 11, Christa had a gap-toothed smile and an unruly mop of thick auburn hair. She was in fifth grade at a new elementary school, Carrboro Elementary. On November 3, 1987, the school bus dropped Christa off near her mother’s home. When Christa arrived, her mother was at work and the house was empty. As she was walking to the mailbox, a 37-year-old neighbor named Claude Davis grabbed her, pushed her down, and raped her.¹⁵ Davis was arrested, charged, and pled “no contest” to a reduced charge, and was shortly released, continuing to live near Christa. He would eventually be arrested numerous times, including for assaulting a woman.

“It was horrible.... It made me feel worthless. I was terrified. He lived right up the street. I could get to his house in less than a minute. He was known as the town pervert. I had to walk by his house to get to the bus stop. The trailer

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of how the North Carolina and West Virginia state social services systems failed to protect Christa from abuse and neglect, see 5. NC and WV Social Services and Juvenile Justice Systems Failed Christa.

¹⁵ Christa’s history of sexual assaults is well documented. The documents related to Claude Davis can be found in 10. Other Supporting Materials.

where I babysat two little girls was here, and here was his trailer (demonstrating it by drawing on paper).... I thought he'd get me again, so I was afraid and hyperaware. No one believed me. I was anxious, was tearful and crying constantly. People would walk up to me and I would be scared.”¹⁶

Christa's life in the wake of the age 11 rape became more chaotic as she was exposed to danger in her own home. Carissa's boyfriends and husbands verbally, physically, and sexually abused Christa. The worst of them was Steve Kyaw, who groped Christa, twisted her nipples, and exposed her to graphic sexual material, keeping stacks of pornography all over the house. Christa took some of this pornography to school and once again her mother was called. Again, no one intervened on Christa's behalf to ask how such a young girl had access to such graphic content. Kyaw also punched Christa with a closed fist in her face in front of neighbors, leading to his arrest. He repeatedly called her a slut and a whore. Christa was briefly removed from the home, and a restraining order was issued against the boyfriend. The charges were dropped when he agreed to move out, after living with Carissa for almost two years, when Christa was 14 years old.

Tennessee legislators have acknowledged that child rape “has a permanent psychological, emotional, and sometimes physical impact on the child.” *Kennedy v. Louisiana*, 554 U.S. 407, 435 (2008). Because of the devastating consequences of child sexual abuse, Tennessee has expanded its death penalty laws to target the perpetrators of such crimes. As Justice Alito has stated, “[t]he immaturity and vulnerability of a child, both physically and psychologically, adds a devastating dimension to rape that is not present when an adult is raped.” *Id.* at 468 (Alito, J., dissenting).

¹⁶ See Brand Report, p. 13.

These observations are borne out by research. “Long-term studies show that sexual abuse is ‘grossly intrusive in the lives of children and is harmful to their normal psychological, emotional, and sexual development in ways which no just or humane society can tolerate.’” *Id.* The psychological problems caused by child rape can include “sudden school failure, unprovoked crying, dissociation, depression, insomnia, sleep disturbances, nightmares, feelings of guilt and inferiority, and self-destructive behavior, including an increased incidence of suicide.” *Id.*¹⁷

The damage wrought by the sexual assaults on this child showed as Christa’s life became even more chaotic. She moved from West Virginia to North Carolina and back again several times as her mother hopped from boyfriend to boyfriend and her father started a new family. Despite being a very intelligent girl, Christa’s grades and behavior at school suffered as she repeatedly changed schools. Due to her parents’ chaotic lives, Christa attended four elementary schools and three middle or junior high schools in those two states. Christa was retained in 3rd and 7th grade due to her poor grades and poor attendance.¹⁸ When she struggled to complete her homework while staying with her father, he beat Christa so severely that the physical scars remain today. When with her mother, Christa often went hungry and lived in dirty, mildewed trailers.

Childhood Trauma and Mental Illness

During this time of extreme vulnerability and constant abuse, two additional things happened. The only adult Christa believed cared for her, her paternal grandmother Delfa,

¹⁷ For additional information about Christa history of sexual violence and the lifelong consequences of that violence, please see Christa Suffered Horrific Sexual Violence That Began When She Was a Toddler.

¹⁸ See Christa Pike’s educational history chart from McCoy social history in 10. Other Supporting Materials.

succumbed to cancer. Christa had long had a special relationship with Delfa Pike. Despite being exposed to her grandmother's abusive boyfriend, Christa saw Delfa as her only reliable source of consistent love and kindness.¹⁹ While Delfa was sick, Christa tried to care for her. She would bring her Ensure and sleep in her bed. Christa was devastated by her death.

Christa “gave up” after losing her grandmother. She attempted suicide for the first time by overdosing on pills. She was 12 years old—notably one year after her second rape by the neighbor Claude Davis. “I cared about nothing after that. I wanted to go with her. I didn’t care about anything.” Brand Report, p. 14. Her mother took her to a mental health professional, but the doctor did not hospitalize her after Christa vomited up the pills she had taken. Christa did not receive any follow-up psychiatric treatment.

Christa had ready access to marijuana and alcohol, which she began using at the age of nine with the knowledge of her parents and their friends, who constantly abused drugs and alcohol around Christa. As any child, she mirrored the behavior she saw.

But her use of drugs and alcohol was also her means to cope. Children who have been abused and assaulted often begin drinking alcohol, using drugs, and/or engaging in self-harm soon after having been abused to distract from their pain and to suppress the memories and emotions related to abuse. Christa developed all three of these problems. She began cutting herself as well as drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana soon after she was raped as a pre-teen.

¹⁹ Brand Report, p. 5.

Christa turned to substances for comfort and relief from what we now know were symptoms of PTSD, Bipolar Disorder, and depression.²⁰ Christa was struggling with the impact of unrelenting, severe trauma without the benefit of psychiatric medication or psychotherapy, and without support from her family. As Dr. Brand explained in her report, drugs and alcohol are often used to the point of causing sedation, so the person cannot think about the humiliation and terror they have been subjected to. Drugs and alcohol can sometimes temporarily quiet the irritability, angry outbursts, terror, nightmares, and hyperarousal caused by untreated trauma and PTSD. As a result, chronic childhood trauma leaves survivors extremely vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse, as these chemicals are a form of “self-medication” for trauma’s myriad crippling symptoms. Brand Report, p. 15.

For Christa, the relief from substances quickly wore off, leaving her alone with her feelings of agitation, irritability, and restlessness. Christa described her marijuana use saying, “It made me calm down and be good.” Her drug use also exposed her to people who were very troubled and who had a damaging influence on her. Brand Report, p. 15–16.

Substance abuse and PTSD were only two of the mental health problems that Christa was developing at a very young age. The average age of onset of Bipolar Disorder is approximately 13 years of age. Brand Report, p. 16. Christa began showing signs of mania or hypomania due to Bipolar Disorder by early adolescence. She suffered from insomnia as a result of her excessive energy. She would induce sleep by going to the beach, where the ocean waves would put her to sleep.

²⁰ For additional discussion of Christa history of severe mental illness, please see Christa Has Suffered from Bipolar Disorder and PTSD Since Childhood.

It is not surprising that by late adolescence, Christa frequently ran away. She was sometimes homeless for periods of time. She survived by hanging out with carnival people. Christa recounted a story to Dr. Brand about a man in his 20s who pressured her to have sex when she was only 14. Because of her history of sexual abuse, she had normalized adults' demands for sex. The adult had taken advantage of her youth and naivete and pressured her to comply with his demands for "sex". *Id.*

Lack of Support System

Christa's parents and the other adults in her life again failed to protect her. She had no idea how to protect herself because she had never known or seen protection. She could not distinguish between people who would use and manipulate her from people who would care about her. *Id.*, p.16–17.

Christa spent time in two different juvenile facilities as a teenager, first Schaeffer House, then Swannanoa.²¹ The records from those facilities show a child desperate for structure and help. Counselors and teachers had wildly varied experiences with Christa. Some described her as sweet, kind, and thoughtful, while others found her to be mischievous and "always in trouble." One teacher, Marshall Muse, selected her to be his teacher's aide and praised her work with other students.²² Christa benefited from the structure of Swannanoa.²³ She was better able to manage her mental illness there than

²¹ Christa was placed in Schaeffer House for truancy, running away, and marijuana use. She was later adjudicated delinquent on misdemeanor breaking, entering, or larceny and placed on probation. Christa was found to have violated probation and sent to Swannanoa.

²² See Matthew Muse Video.

²³ *Id.*

she was in the chaos of her home life. Each time Christa came close to being discharged, she violated a rule that would extend her time at the facility. She should have gone home after three months but stayed fifteen and a half months.²⁴

Attorney Matthew Martin, currently a judge, represented Christa in North Carolina juvenile proceedings that sent her to Swannanoa. He remembers Christa well, because he had never had a kid sent to training school before and “this kid, this child clearly didn’t belong in training school.” Martin describes Christa as a teenage kid who was clearly bright, charming, and with a sense of humor.²⁵ He went to visit her at the training school. He believes Christa should have been removed from her mother’s home, because she was putting Christa in harm’s way, and provided with trauma services.²⁶ Instead,

We went off the rails in her case, we didn’t consider her best interest, it wasn’t in her best interest to go to training school... she should have had services wrapped around her... when she came to the attention of the Department of Social Services in Durham, she was a child who really should have been taken into [foster] care [and removed from the home] as a dependent child, and instead we adjudicated her as a delinquent. That was the wrong result... we failed her.²⁷

Christa returned to her mother’s house and to chaos and abuse. Christa befriended a mentally troubled homeless man and spent time living on the streets with him.

When Christa was 17 years old, she was raped again. While she was walking along a road at night, a man grabbed her and pulled her into the woods. Christa recalled, “I was fighting him so hard that he barely got started (raping her).” Christa managed to escape

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *See* Matthew Martin Video.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

and ran as fast as she could to a friend's house, who then took her to a hospital. The staff collected a rape kit, but the man was never identified or caught.

With Visible and Invisible Scars, Christa Enters the Violence of Job Corps

Knowing she needed a new start, Christa turned to Job Corps, the Federal job training program for troubled youth. Christa had enjoyed going to work with her mother in nursing homes and tending to elderly patients and she wanted to become a nurse. In the Fall of 1994, Christa left North Carolina to enroll in Job Corps in Knoxville, Tennessee. Unbeknownst to Christa, Knoxville's Job Corps had a well-earned reputation for violence.²⁸ Participants were known to carry knives and razor blades. Carissa remembered seeing blood smeared on the dorm walls when she visited.

In the violent environment of Job Corps, Tadaryl Shipp was one of its most violent residents. Shipp came to Job Corps from Memphis in 1994, after exhibiting abusive and violent behavior. Tadaryl was widely known to be in possession of a firearm. *See William Joesph Mode Post-Conviction Testimony*, p. 770. Tadaryl walked around the Job Corps building carrying a razor blade in his mouth. *McCoy Social History*, p. 53. Other students were terrified of him. Andrew Dace recalled that Tadaryl "just liked to hurt anybody he could." *See Andrew Scott Dace Post-Conviction Testimony*, p. 683. Tadaryl attacked Dace

²⁸ In 1988, the Knoxville Job Corps had relocated to 621 Dale Avenue (formerly a Holiday Inn hotel) and by 1994, the percentage of police calls in that enforcement zone rose from 17.1% to 81.6%—an increase of 389.5%. Between April 2, 1994, and January 22, 1995, at least 15 assaults and five rapes involving Knoxville Job Corps students were reported—the number of assaults was 3.5 times higher than the national average at Job Corps centers. On October 4, 1992, Kiesha Nicole Small, age 18, was charged with attempted murder for attacking a female at the Knoxville Job Corps with a box cutter. In October 1993, two Knoxville Job Corps students were charged with kidnapping and raping a young woman and beating her boyfriend.

more than once, but the worst incident he recalls was when Tadaryl tried to throw him off a bridge near the Job Corps that was about 200 feet above railroad tracks. *Id.*, p. 683–84.

Christa fell into Tadaryl's orbit shortly after her arrival at Job Corps, following her mother's pattern of finding her value and worth in the attention of a volatile and violent men. The relationship was predictably abusive. As Dr. Brand describes,

[H]e grabbed her by the throat and pinned her against the wall. She fought back in self-defense as best she could. There were other times he was physically aggressive as well as extremely threatening. One time after shoving Christa, he opened his mouth and showed her that he had a razor hidden in his mouth. He was demonstrating in a menacing way that he could do much worse to her if he decided to.

Brand Report, p. 23. As a teenager coming from a home with a great deal of neglect and abuse, Christa felt that Tadaryl's aggressiveness meant that she was safe. *Id.* "This type of extremely illogical thinking can result when a child is raised in a chaotic, violent world." *Id.* Christa believed that if she was the girlfriend of an aggressive male, she would be safe, that Tadaryl would protect her. *Id.*

A former girlfriend of Tadaryl Shipp testified in post-conviction that before he left for Job Corps, she was in an abusive relationship with him and that he hit, slapped, punched, and kicked her. Testimony of Deandrea Gates, p. 183. She described Shipp as a manipulative person who preyed on people weaker than him, especially women. *Id.*

Christa met Colleen Slemmer when she arrived at the Job Corps in late 1994. When Christa returned home for Christmas in 1994, she told her mother about Colleen entering her room with a box cutter and generally how stressed she was feeling. McCoy Social History, p. 52. She expressed to friends both her love of her new boyfriend, Tadaryl, and

her fear of him. Christa did not want to return to Job Corps, but her mother and her sister Alicia insisted she return to complete the program. *Id.*

At Job Corps, Christa could no longer self-medicate her bipolar symptoms. In the week leading up to the crime, Christa was not well. She was not sleeping, she was erratic, and she was exhausted. Christa described the days before the crime to Dr. Brand:

When I stopped marijuana, I started staying up all the time, and I was irritated and angry again.... I felt like my skin was hurting, like I had the flu. I could feel my hair. I was angry, irritated. I didn't want anyone around me.... Any little thing was such an irritant.

Dr. Brand Report, p. 26. Christa believed that Colleen was threatening her, and that Colleen was trying to take Tadaryl from her.

Nearly one year to the day after Christa was violently raped for the last time, she, Tadaryl, and fellow Job Corps resident Shadolla Peterson asked Colleen to join them at a nearby park to smoke some marijuana. Christa intended to threaten and fight Colleen. She wanted to scare her away from Tadaryl. But in the throes of her mania Christa could not “put on the brakes.” Brand Report, p. 24.²⁹ Dr. Brand concluded that Christa's aggression toward Colleen unconsciously repeated the brutality of her childhood and teenage trauma. *Id.*, p. 27. Moreover, the violence of Colleen's death closely mirrored the violence Christa suffered a year before when she was raped at seventeen. Christa's mother's boyfriends often called Christa a “whore” and a “slut”; the very same language that Christa remembers Colleen using. The recurring trauma of her youth and Christa's deep fear of abandonment heightened the threat Christa felt she faced. Dr. Brand says

²⁹ See also Dr. Jonathan Pincus's report, p. 4.

that Christa became “disorganized in her thinking. Under serious stress, she [was] unable to reign in control of her behavior, emotions and thinking.” Brand Report, p. 27–28.

Court Proceedings and Lack of Adequate Counsel

Even though the crime was highly sensationalized in the Knoxville media market, Christa went on trial in Knox County just over a year after she was charged. The Knoxville District Attorney extended an offer to settle the case for life without parole on the eve of trial.³⁰ Lead counsel William Talman believes that if he had more time to discuss the offer with Christa, the case would have been settled rather than ending in a death sentence. It is his greatest regret. He describes Christa as “extremely emotionally immature” and out of touch with the realities of her trial. As an example, Mr. Talman describes Christa saying she was “happy” after the guilty verdicts “because it was the first time in her life that she could remember so many members of her family being there for her.”³¹

Christa was ill-equipped to assist in her own defense, or to judge what factors from her background might help convince a jury to spare her life. Her court-appointed attorneys, William Talman and Julie Martin Rice, were also inexperienced, as neither had tried a death penalty case.³² Mr. Talman acknowledged that the most important part of Christa’s trial was the penalty phase. Despite this understanding, the presentation to persuade the jury to spare Christa’s life lasted only an hour, according to the penalty closing argument, which is contained in just six transcript pages. *See* Defense Penalty Phase Closing

³⁰ Talman letter, p. 2–3.

³¹ *Id.*, p. 2. Mr. Talman was profoundly affected by this statement which made him want to hug his own daughter, so that she “always knows she is loved.”

³² For more information on the failings of Christa’s trial counsel, see *The Legal Profession Failed Christa*.

Argument March 30, 1986. Trial counsel failed to present compelling mitigating evidence, which was known to the trial team, to the jury that sentenced this girl to death.

In every death penalty case, a lawyer's most important duty is to give the jury a reason to spare their client's life. Christa's lawyers failed miserably at this essential task. Counsel did not tell the jury that Christa's youth was a statutory mitigating factor, or that the jury might spare her life based on her lack of significant criminal record. Counsel never told the jury about her history of sexual abuse and rapes as a child. Rather, counsel emphasized the prosecution argument that Christa enjoyed the attention this case brought. The jury responded by imposing the harshest punishment under the law and sentenced Christa to death. Had she been slightly younger at the time of the crime, like her codefendant Shipp, Christa would have been ineligible for the death penalty.

Video footage from Christa's trial and sentencing show a young girl crying to hug her mother.³³ She struggled in the following years in prison, and she struggled to express remorse. She cycled through her still undiagnosed Bipolar Disorder. Yet, she remained thoughtful and intensely loyal. She helped inmates who needed supplies, as she does to this day. She befriended a woman named Patricia Jones while still in Knox County Detention Center despite Ms. Jones' violent history and use of "buzzing noises" to taunt Christa about her sentence.

Christa's Incarceration

Christa experienced episodes of depression and hypomania that were increasingly aggravated by the prison's misguided attempt to medicate her myriad mental health

³³ See WBIR news, at <https://www.wbir.com/video/news/local/march-30-1996-christa-pike-is-sentenced-to-death/51-bc611a44-2e79-4084-96a6-f1f11c9f9fc4>

issues. She would go several nights in a row without sleep, experiencing irritability and depressive symptoms, followed by an inability to get out of bed. Not long after she arrived at the women's prison, Christa was placed in solitary confinement. This had a profound effect on Christa. Dr. Stuart Grassian Report, p. 9–10.³⁴

In 2001, Christa's mental health reached a crisis point. While in solitary confinement 22–23 hours a day, the prison had diagnosed Christa with obsessive compulsive disorder and prescribed Prozac. Prozac can cause a “manic switch”—meaning that it can aggravate symptoms of hypomania, including impaired judgment, irritability, and sleep disruption. Dr. George Woods Report, p. 7. Thus, the Prozac, along with the solitary confinement, exacerbated Christa's still undiagnosed and untreated Bipolar Disorder. Christa became hopeless and despondent. She told her lawyers and the post-conviction court that she wanted to give up her appeals and volunteer to be executed.

Christa had been housed in the segregation unit at the women's prison for five years by that time and had been held almost exclusively in 23-hour lockup. People can suffer a wide range of responses to the neuropsychologic stress of such solitary confinement, and “preexisting psychological vulnerability is a critical factor in determining the severity of such response.”³⁵ Dr. Grassian consulted with Dr. George Woods who indicated that Christa suffered from Bipolar mood disorder.³⁶ Dr. Grassian noted that “individuals with bipolar mood disorder are among the most vulnerable of all” to develop psychopathologic

³⁴ Dr. Stuart Grassian Report, p. 2. Dr. Grassian is an expert in the impacts of solitary confinement.

³⁵ *Id.*, p. 3.

³⁶ *Id.*, p. 10.

effects of solitary confinement. *Id.* Regarding Christa's other vulnerabilities, Dr. Grassian stated that she suffered a history of severe childhood sexual and physical abuse and her emotional development and experience had often been chaotic, explosive and volatile.³⁷ "Powerful emotion can overwhelm a vulnerable person's capacity to reason, reflect, and choose...." *Id.* Christa has particular difficulty tolerating feelings of attachment, dependency, and abandonment. For Christa, "such feelings are often terrifying and disorganizing; the feelings can become blinding, screaming all-consuming." *Id.*

While Christa was suffering from this upheaval, before she was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and began treatment, and against prison policy, in August 2001 Christa was placed in an outdoor recreation pen with two other women—Natasha Cornett, a friend of Christa's, and Patricia Jones, the woman Christa knew from the Knoxville jail who had been convicted of first degree murder for stabbing an elderly woman 199 times. *Pike v. State*, M2012-01640-CCA-R3-PC, 2013 WL 5459647, at *5 (Tenn. Crim. App., Sep. 30, 2013). Natasha and Ms. Jones began arguing and Natasha took a swing at Ms. Jones. Ms. Jones, who had previously threatened to kill Cornett, moved to fight her. Christa jumped on Ms. Jones's back and choked her with a shoelace until she was incapacitated.

Ms. Jones has testified that while incarcerated in prison since 1996, she had assaulted correctional officers approximately ten times. *Id.* She also had assaulted several inmates. *Id.* Jones admitted that she "always hit first." *Id.* Jones said she had threatened to kill other individuals at the prison, including Christa Pike and Natasha Cornett, prior to the 2001 incident. *Id.* Jones testified that while she and Christa were incarcerated at the Knox County Jail, Christa prevented her from killing an inmate whose head she was

³⁷ Grassian Report, p. 3.

holding down in a toilet. *Id.* Christa also pulled her off of another inmate whose head she had rammed against the cell bars. *Id.* Christa also prevented Jones from killing a third inmate who she was choking with a telephone cord. *Id.*

In the aftermath of this altercation, Christa continued to cycle through the manic and depressive states of her still undiagnosed Bipolar Disorder. The overwhelming and “all-consuming” emotions that Dr. Grassian described in his report surfaced as Christa manically told her mother that she had intended to kill Ms. Jones. This statement was used to convict Christa of attempted murder.

Ms. Jones would later admit that Christa did the right thing by pulling her away from her friend. Ms. Jones made it clear that she would have killed Natasha and still would if given the chance. She forgave Christa and understood why she intervened. See Patricia Jones Testimony Davidson PC, p. 59.

Days after the Patricia Jones incident, Christa wrote the judge to reiterate her desire to withdraw her post-conviction petition and schedule an execution date. The judge ordered an investigation into Christa’s competency to make that decision. Accordingly, Christa received evaluations and mental health care that she had never received before but so desperately needed. During this time Christa was finally diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. It took almost a year for doctors to find appropriate medication to help Christa. During that year, her symptoms worsened. She hallucinated, and believed worms were coming out of the walls after her. She described feeling as though her “skin [was] constantly crawling.” Dr. William Kenner Report, p. 36. With the help of Dr. Kenner, who evaluated Christa pursuant to the post-conviction court’s order after her request to drop

her appeals, Christa's Bipolar Disorder was properly medicated. She has not had a disciplinary charge for an act of violence since being properly medicated.

A Victim of Child Rape Finds Stability, Purpose in Prison

While incarcerated, Christa worked to heal the impact of childhood abuse and neglect. In addition to the mood-stabilizing medications that she is cooperatively taking, Christa reports having been helped a great deal by a therapist, Dr. Ali Winters, who provided her with treatment. Christa loves art and is an accomplished painter. She loves helping new women to the prison, like Kasey Raines who was sent to TPW as a pregnant young woman struggling with addiction. Christa supported and encouraged her; she made sure Kasey and her growing baby had proper nutrition.³⁸

After years of psychotherapy and medications to treat her mental illness, Christa is thoughtful, even-tempered, bright, funny, and hopeful. She exhibits deep remorse for killing Colleen Slemmer and the impact of her actions on Colleen's family and friends.

Christa was an 18-year-old girl when she committed the crime for which she has been sentenced to death. If she is executed on September 30, she will be the first woman Tennessee executes in over 200 years. She would also be the first person Tennessee has executed in the modern era who was a teenager at the time of the offense. In fact, the average age at time of the offense for the seventeen people executed since 1961 is 28.94 years. The youngest person executed in the last 65 years was 23 years old at the time of the offense. Such death sentences for youthful offenders have now become exceedingly rare

³⁸ See Kasey Raines letter, urging mercy for Christa, who she knows to be "a kind person, a loving person." Kasey is now a Peer Recovery Specialist in East Tennessee. For more from Kasey, see Kasey Raines Video.

in this country in the years since her conviction.³⁹ Christa was the last person sentenced to death in Tennessee for an offense committed at age 18. The handful of males who were death-sentenced at that age all had their sentences set aside.

Christa chose to participate in the circumstances which spiraled out of control and led to Collen Slemmer's death. For that, she should be punished severely, consistent with other sentences for 18-year-old female offenders, and spend the rest of her life incarcerated.

But this story did not begin with Christa's crime.

Christa did not choose to be born with brain damage because her mother drank during pregnancy. She did not choose to be neglected, abused, abandoned, and beaten—which led to her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She did not choose to have Bipolar Disorder which her in-utero brain damage increased the likelihood of occurring.

Most significantly, Christa did not choose to be repeatedly raped as a child, first as a toddler, then at 11, then at 17. The State of Tennessee recognizes the profound harm of such abuse, which follows an individual throughout their life. Respectfully, she shouldn't die the way her rapists would today.

With mercy, Christa will continue to help vulnerable, frightened young women like Teddy, Ashlee, and Kasey to make a difference in the world.

³⁹ For more information about how disproportionate Christa's death sentence is compared to those of a similar age who committed similar crimes, Christa's Death Sentence is Disproportionate When Compared to Her Co-Defendants and Other 18 Year Olds.