

## **Kempis Songster Written Testimony:**

**My name is Kempis Songster. Some people know me as Ghani. I am driven by a great sense of duty and honor to offer a point of view to this very important conversation about the value and effectiveness of restorative justice on non-carceral approaches to harm reduction.**

**Perhaps my lived experience can be helpful here:**

**For the past three years, I served as the inaugural program manager of Philadelphia's first restorative justice diversion program, *Healing Futures*. It is a program of the *Youth Art and Self-empowerment Project* operated in partnership with Philadelphia's District Attorney's Office. In that capacity, i worked with a small team of dedicated restorative justice practitioners to facilitate accountability by the person responsible for the harm, the beginning of healing for the survivor of that harm, and reconciliation between the two. This work has enjoyed unwavering support from social workers, other organizations, college**

**students/interns, and community members, with support from the DA's Office. I have witnessed, time and time again, the transformative power of true accountability. That is, when people who have caused harm are given the opportunity, votes of confidence, and support to fulfill their obligation to the person they have harmed and to the community.**

**Take the case of Daniel W, who was referred to Healing Futures for a restorative approach to the part he played with a group of young people who brutally attacked Janelle H on the City Hall subway platform as Janelle was on her way home to her one-year-old daughter after work. At our first meeting with Janelle, she expressed her relief that a restorative approach exists that would not be detrimental to Daniel's growth and development. When she and Daniel finally came face-to-face at a restorative community conference, Janelle let Daniel know how much his actions impacted her life that day and she was able to hear Daniel take accountability in the form of an apology to her, to his family, and to the community. Janelle**

**then asked Daniel to volunteer for four hours a week for six months at an organization that helps people to heal from violence. Daniel volunteered at a victims advocacy organization in Philadelphia, putting in extra three hours weekly and an additional 12 months of his own volition. Daniel still joins and leads neighborhood clean-ups and was even caught, unbeknownst to him, marching on 52nd St. against gun violence. Accountability and the opportunity to engage in restorative service has awakened the leadership and advocacy spirit and voice in Daniel W.**

**After decades of being confined to the never-ending cycle of crime and punishment, restorative justice offers communities a way to freedom from that cycle. Restorative justice is a breath of fresh air in these times of increasing despair in communities caught between rampant violence and mass human caging. Restorative justice diversion especially also offers a prefigurative intervention geared towards getting the system out of the way of, and getting communities more involved in, what really needs to happen after people cause**

**harm. Many in our community have already realized that what needs to happen after harm is done is learning and understanding what the needs of the person harmed are, what the responsible youth needs to help repair the harm(s), what the community needs to be healthy and whole in the wake of harm, then everyone working to see that those needs are met. Such a process must be created and held by community members and community-based organizations, operating locally and nationally. I am proud to be a part of this worthwhile effort.**

**I am now with the *Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (CFSY)* as their first Transformative Healing and Restorative Justice Manager. I embrace my new responsibilities of helping to advance CFSY's emergent priority of amplifying alternatives to "adult incarceration" and other egregious treatments of youth convicted of serious/violent offenses. I believe that helping to sow the seeds of healing, restoration, and transformation in our society's justice process is a way to contribute to real public safety and public health.**

**I know the burdens of causing harm; irreparable harm. I understand the crushing weight of guilt and shame for committing human trespasses, especially the ultimate trespass; the taking of a human life. I was condemned to a death by incarceration sentence. I have been graced with this opportunity to submit my words to you because of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that outlawed the sentencing of children to life without parole. I was resentenced and made immediately eligible for parole. But, not before I spent 30 years in prison, from the age of 15 to 45.**

**I am committed to transformative healing and restorative justice as a way to reducing harm without piling on more harm. This commitment is born out of deep sense of debt and obligation to the family, community, and world that I had harmed. It is not condemnation, nor 30 years spent in prison, but my own self-accounting and belief in restoration and transformative intervention, which restorative justice offers, that birthed my commitment to be an agent of**

**making violence and victimization no longer characteristics of my community.**

**I implore this Committee to support restorative approaches over carceral approaches to harm. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.**