

Student Perspectives on Just Mercy



Vanessa Eveleth, ('23).
Photo courtesy of Ceci Rigby

Vanessa Eveleth

Student perspective

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines justice as “Just behavior or treatment,” “The quality of being fair and reasonable” and “The administration of the law or authority in maintaining this.” *Just Mercy* exposes how the criminal justice system operates more from prejudice than fairness and reason. After reading *Just Mercy* as the Honors summer common read, my definition of justice now includes upholding of the law with fairness, reason, and compassion

for humanity. Justice is not incarceration because incarceration stores people in prisons. Justice is not killing, which is what the criminal justice system does by placing inmates on death row. Justice is finding the person responsible for a crime, not framing another. Justice is holding a person accountable for their actions and only their actions.

In 1944, George Stinney was falsely convicted of murdering two white girls. There was no evidence, but, being a black youth in South Carolina, Stinney was forced to confess and placed on death row. Our laws are meant to prevent people from hurting others or themselves; they should not be an excuse for discrimination. Justice is not only fair sentencing but also fair treatment of those serving time in prison.

Over 50 percent of U.S. inmates are diagnosed with mental illness, yet they are denied treatment. Justice would be providing the care that is necessary for mental and physical health. For some, this requires treatment through a mental health facility rather than a prison; facilitating such care is justice. Stevenson’s journey as a legal attorney is an indispensable reflection on the U.S. criminal justice system. It can and should be used to rethink how we define and implement justice. Fairness, reason, and compassion must be applied to all criminal trials while upholding the law; only then can justice be guaranteed for all people in the United States. *HML*.

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Peer Mentor Sophie Caligiuri, ('22).
Photo courtesy of Ceci Rigby

Sophie Caligiuri

Peer mentor perspective

I have never stepped foot inside a prison.

On occasion, I find myself in the passenger seat of a car, sailing along the highway, heading west. As the Utah State Prison begins to materialize, looming through the raindrop stained glass of the car windows, I can’t help but gawk.

Transfixed as I am by this mass of stone and fence, I think, ‘What’s inside?’ I see that the sun-yellowed yard is always empty; no one is ever outside. I wonder: what would it be like to go without the sky?

But I’ve never stepped foot inside a prison, so to me, I suppose it doesn’t matter. Our car speeds past.

I am not the only one. You too, I’m sure, are guilty of this.

Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* is a microscope. In his memoir, Stevenson knowingly guides the reader through the most intimate and horrifying corners of the United States’ prison system.

While reading the work, I came face-to-face with several people who spent most of their lives locked in a jail cell on death row. These prisoners are largely low-income people of color, and in many specific cases, are wrongly condemned or completely innocent.

Justice is a powerful word - one I’m not sure I’ll ever truly be able to define. However, after reading *Just Mercy*, there is something I now know. The worst crime committed in this book was not by any of the prisoners. The worst crime was committed by the justice system, by the general population, by me, and yes—even by you. It was committed in a perceived state of innocence, in a place of safety. This crime is apathy. In order to define justice, you must first ask yourself: Am I guilty?

When I think of justice, I now think of the innocent people—my age or younger—who have been condemned to die by a system that has always disfavored them. I envision the opening chapter of *Just Mercy* where Stevenson writes: “We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated.”

I think of the empty fields off to the side of the freeway surrounded by barbed wire. I think, “let them see the sky.” *HML*.

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