

Dear Judge Bohren,

They say your life can change in an instant. For us that instant was the morning of May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014 when our daughter, Payton, was brutally stabbed 19 times by two people she trusted, people she believed were her friends. The trauma of that day has defined our lives for past three and half years and continues to remind us how one event can change everything you believed to be true. Memories of Detective Trussoni walking into our backyard to inform me of the stabbing, of telling my then 10 year old son we had to leave for the hospital immediately because his sister had just been stabbed, the terrified look of confusion and fear in his eyes, calling my husband to tell him Payton had been stabbed and begging him to be safe on his motorcycle as he rushed to the hospital, family arriving in the ICU waiting room and forming an ever growing circle as we endured what felt like endless hours of waiting for news still haunt me. And there are memories I won't let myself dwell on because it brings a fear and pain that I'm still not ready to face.

The 19 stab wounds that Payton endured that day left 19 very visible scars on her arms, her legs, her hip, her torso, and her chest. The nearly 6 hour surgery and other medical treatments to repair her heart, diaphragm, liver, stomach, and pancreas left 6 more scars. Two of these scars span from just below her neck to just below her belly button. They are still red and angry more than 3 years later. They tingle and ache and remind her of their presence every day. Things that should be a fun experience for a mother and daughter have become mired with reminders of her attack. Shopping for homecoming dresses leaves only a few options because far too many dresses will show off her scars. Beach vacations are harsh reminders that swimsuits aren't made for young girls with 25 scars.

But Payton's wounds are far beyond physical. The emotional trauma she has endured will remain with her for a very long time. It will fade and feel less intense as the years progress but it will always be there, menacing in the back of her mind reminding her not to trust too deeply or love unconditionally because the last time she did she nearly died. For months after the attack Payton would only speak to me. She slept in my bed; partially because she needed help getting in and out of bed but mostly because she was afraid to sleep in her room. She wouldn't go in the basement because the last time Morgan was at our house the basement rec room was where they played and slept. When she did finally move back into her bedroom she refused to unlock the windows or open the curtains. She slept with scissors under her pillow. She couldn't sleep unless I was in the room next to her and could respond to three knocks on her wall with three knocks on mine signifying "I love you, you're safe, and I'm here". If I happened to be gone for the evening she wouldn't go to sleep until I got home. Outwardly Payton seemed to recover remarkably fast. She went to sleepovers, made new friends, started seventh grade on time and in the same school she had been the year before. She went on cross country trips to Hilton Head and Rhode Island with friends and international trips to Canada with her French class. But she was different. She was more reserved and more cautious. She held everyone at arm's length and never let anyone get too close. She immersed herself in school in an attempt to distract herself from the uncertainty of her life; everything she knew about her home and her family was different. And she didn't know how to cope with that.

Payton's attacked impacted far more than just her. Our son, Caden, has struggled immensely. At just ten years old he was forced to wonder whether his older sister would live or die. He spent 8 hours in the hospital waiting room watching his parents talk with police officers and doctors. He watched our faces grow more concerned as the gravity of Payton's condition became apparent. When he finally did go home he did so without his parents because we spent the next six nights and seven days at the hospital with Payton. When she finally did come home she needed a significant amount of care and attention. She needed help moving around, she couldn't eat without feeling ill, and she was in a significant amount of pain. Caden began to feel like a forgotten child. The media attention the case received focused on Payton. Payton received care packages and get well cards and gifts from family and friends. Caden seemed to sink into the sidelines as we all tried to deal with the

unknown. He still struggles with anxiety, feelings of abandonment, and the belief that he is somehow less important than his sister.

Our marriage was drastically affected, as well. Everyone copes differently with trauma and loss; we knew that going into this. But we could never seem to get on the same page which made it harder to come together during times when we really needed each other. What felt like never ending trips to the courthouse for hearings, media requests, and doctor and therapy appointments created a cavern between the two of us. As the years dragged on the cavern got wider and scarier to breach. And even though we both love each other and cherish our family we can't seem to find a way to traverse the pain that exists in that cavern and find our way back to one another.

Joe and I raised Payton and her brother, Caden, to be empathetic and compassionate people. In the end it was that compassion that led Payton into the woods with Morgan and Anissa. You see, Payton knew that if she wasn't Morgan's friend then Morgan wouldn't have any friends. She felt a need to protect Morgan and believed deeply that every person deserved at least one friend. Payton is a remarkable human being that survived the unthinkable. But she will struggle with the events of that day and physical and emotional scars it left for the rest of her life. We are all still trying to figure out what it means to live in the "new normal" that we have been forced to endure. We didn't choose this life, it was thrust upon us unwillingly and we have had no choice but to stand up and deal with it in the best way we knew how.

We accepted the plea deals for Morgan and Anissa for two reasons. First, because we believed it was the best thing to do to ensure Payton would not have to testify. Traumatizing her further didn't seem worth it. She has never talked about her attack so asking her to testify and relive her experience in front of a courtroom of strangers felt cruel and unnecessary. And second, because Payton felt placement in a mental health facility was the best disposition for both girls. While Payton believes a mental health facility is the best place for Morgan and Anissa she still fears for her safety. She still sleeps with her windows closed, locked, and with the security latches engaged. She still refuses to open her curtains. You now have an opportunity to determine the sentence Morgan and Anissa will serve. When making your decision I ask that you consider everything Payton and those closest to her have endured over the last three and half years. Payton has a lifetime of healing ahead of her and she deserves to be allowed to heal in an environment where she feels safe. I know she will not feel safe if either Morgan or Anissa are released back in to the community unsupervised. She has big dreams and my hope is that nothing stands in her way while she strives to achieve them.

Thank you for your consideration,

Stacie Leutner