

April 1, 2026

The Honorable Charles Grassley  
Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Durbin  
Ranking Member, Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

**Re: Support for Justin Smith to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit**

Dear Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Durbin, and Members of the Committee:

I write to offer my sincere and heartfelt support for Justin Smith. I do not come from a legal background, but I do come from a lifetime of experience with the justice system, most of it spent behind prison walls. Justin played a direct and meaningful role in recommending the clemency that allowed me to walk free after more than three decades.

In 1982, I was sentenced to life in prison, with no possibility of parole for 50 years, despite the trial judge describing me as a “relatively minor participant” in an incident that tragically resulted in a murder. At the time, I was a vulnerable young woman whose life had been shaped by trauma. From a young age, I was sexually abused, including by a pastor at the age of 17. At 18, I married the father of my two children, hoping for stability, but that marriage ended after 12 years of domestic abuse. Those experiences left me susceptible to influence and in a relationship where I was easily led. At my boyfriend’s direction, I met with a jeweler and asked him to come with me outside of town, where my boyfriend joined us. When he would not hand over valuables, my boyfriend shot him three times. I did not know he had a gun. One of those shots hit me in my abdomen. I did not pull the trigger, but I was the one who stayed behind bars for decades while the man who committed the shooting went free.

My case was also marked by failures in the system that I did not understand at the time. My attorney never told me about a plea offer that could have changed the course of my life. Because my attorney represented both me and the shooter, this dual representation created both a constitutional and ethical conflict of interest. On top of that, I was not able to fully present my account due to false testimony arranged by the

shooter and the attorney. I later learned from the prosecutor, who would become a future advocate for my release, that my case kept him up at night.

While I was in prison, I made a decision about how I would live the time I had been given. I became a certified paralegal and helped other women prepare clemency applications. I worked to build something meaningful where very little is offered. I founded the PATCH (Parents and Their Children) Program to create a more humane, home-like space for children visiting their incarcerated mothers, along with parenting classes to help those relationships endure. I also helped launch the 4-H Life Program in partnership with the University of Missouri to bring families together, build leadership skills, and help break cycles of incarceration.

At the same time, I never stopped advocating for myself. I wrote to seven governors asking for clemency. At one point, Governor Carnahan was prepared to grant it, but he passed away before he could act. For many years, despite every effort, my case remained unheard. No one wanted to make the hard decision.

Then Justin Smith came into my life. My daughter, Angel, first told me someone in the Governor's office was looking closely at my case. When Justin came to see me in December 2017, I could tell right away he had looked at everything. He knew details about my case that surprised me, and it was obvious he understood the legal issues. But even more meaningful, Justin appreciated that there was a human behind the issues. He listened to me, and he cared about making it right. He asked thoughtful questions, not just about what had happened, but about who I was and what I hoped to do if given another chance. It meant something to be seen and heard after so many years. Justin also reviewed the constitutional and ethical circumstances of my case carefully, approaching them with the same diligence one would expect of a judge.

Three weeks later, and to my surprise, Justin returned to the prison. This time, he told me someone wanted to meet me. The Governor came into the room and told me he commuted my sentence to time served, with immediate release. I fell to my knees and cried. After 36 years in prison, I walked out a free woman.

Since my release, I have tried to live in a way that honors the second chance I was given. I have published a book and spoken across the country about my time in prison, advocating for incarcerated mothers. I have continued to work with the programs I established in prison. I do not take this second chance for granted.

I am forever grateful for the role Justin played in my life. But beyond my own experience, I believe his actions show the kind of judgment and character that are essential for someone serving on the bench. For 36 years, no one was willing to make the decision to grant me relief. Justin was. He reviewed the case carefully, weighed the facts, and had the judgment and courage to act. He does the hard work, seeks the truth,

and is willing to make difficult decisions. He understands that behind every case is a person, and that the law must be applied with integrity.

I believe it would be an honor for the United States to have someone like Justin serve in this role. I fully support his nomination and respectfully ask the Committee to give it full consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Judy Henderson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Judy Henderson