Michael Lyons: A Mother's Plea for Justice

By Sandy Friend, mother of Michael Lyons

Michael was my sweet, kind, funny little boy. He had beautiful blue eyes, a huge smile, and a laugh I still miss every day. He was his big sister Alithya's protector, always watching over her, and he couldn't have been more proud to be a big brother when baby Mattea was born. He was my little helper, and he would knock on neighbors' doors to ask for flowers to bring me. Michael was eight years old.

Michael loved the ocean and finding sand dollars, and I have shared that love with all his sisters and my grandchildren through the years. He loved camping, especially the bonfire with s'mores and telling stories. One trip, Michael, Alithya, and I drove to the top of a hill in an open meadow near Little Grass Valley Lake and sat on the hood of my car, watching the stars. We picked out constellations and the Milky Way. On our camping trips we would wake up early and drive around "hunting" for wildlife, not real hunting, just to see how many animals we could spot. Michael had been fishing since he could walk, throwing the line in and reeling it back as fast as he could, until one day when he was about two years old, he caught a perch on a worm. From that day on, fishing was his favorite thing to do. Between six and eight, he found two of his favorite fish, striper and catfish, and the way he lit up when the pole bent could be seen all over his face. And when he was only four years old, he was brave enough to hold on and drop off the rope swing. I had told him no for over a year, and the excitement when I finally said yes was something I'll never forget. Of course I was in the water waiting for him.

On May 16, 1996, my son was walking home from school in Yuba City when a monster picked him up. Right after school, around 3 p.m., he took Michael to the river. Michael was terrified of the dark. He wouldn't even take out the trash after sundown because, in his own words, "the boogeyman was going to get him." When night fell, he was deep in the river bottoms with this monster.

At some point, Michael escaped. His little footprints ran down the bank in the sand, and right beside them were bigger prints running the same way. Then Michael's footprints disappeared. The other prints turned around and walked back to where Michael was found the next day, with nothing but his Batman shirt pulled up over his little face. But those footprints on the riverbank weren’t the only place they found signs of Michael. Inside that monster's truck, pressed flat against the passenger side toward the very top of the windshield, were Michael's bare footprints. It was like Michael was letting us know, "I was here, I was fighting, trying to get away." The evidence showed he had defensive wounds; he fought as hard as an 8-year-old could to try to save his own life.

He was raped and sodomized, tortured for ten hours, and stabbed 70 to 80 times, with each knife wound twisted. Michael also had scrape wounds across his little face, inflicted repeatedly from that serrated knife. When I finally got to see Michael after they found him, the investigators

would only let me see his face and one hand. I could see those scrape marks—those knife wounds—across his little face, and that image will forever be the last image of his beautiful face I would ever see. The coroner determined that Michael survived the vast majority of the stabbing and torture. The final, fatal wounds were three deep lacerations to his neck that cut from ear to ear. For ten hours, my little boy was alive for all of it. This is why he was convicted of torture. I know every detail, and it never leaves me.

A jury sentenced Robert Rhoades to death in 1999, and the California Supreme Court affirmed that verdict in 2019. DNA from Michael's case later linked this monster to the 1984 murder of Julie Connell, an 18-year-old girl, and he was sentenced to death for her murder too, though that sentence was later changed to life without parole. A woman he kidnapped in Marysville in 1985 survived and testified against him at both of his trials.

We were told that after the trial, all we would have to do was get through appeals. Instead, we have been back in court again and again, including a new sentencing hearing last year in which a judge upheld Robert Rhoades' death sentence. Each time, we relive the worst day of our lives. Through the years my heart has been shattered over and over by how laws can change and a sentence this monster earned can be taken away. The justice system asks families to trust the process, but changing the rules decades later shatters that trust completely.

Now, Governor Newsom is considering a sweeping blanket commutation to undo hundreds of these death sentences all at once. Each of those sentences came from a trial, a jury, a judge, and years of rigorous review. A mass reduction treats every case identically, completely ignoring the individuality of the victims and the gravity of their suffering. Michael was a little boy with a name, a face, and a family who loves him.

He was just like anybody else's child in our state. He could have been the Governor's son. But a governor's child has protection that ordinary families never have. Normal, everyday families do not have security around the clock. We do everything we can to protect our children. We talk to them about strangers and boundaries, no matter who they are. But the truth is that it is an evil adult against a child. I have always wondered whether he stalked Michael before that day. Look at Polly Klaas. The monster went into her safe place, her own home, and took her.

If the Governor truly wants to alter these sentences, I urge him to read the true facts of each case first. We have already seen that "life" doesn't always stay life. How can anyone live with the possibility of these monsters finding a legal loophole to secure a future release? Our loved ones' blood would be on those hands forever.

I went to the Capitol and waited to speak with the Governor, and he wouldn't see me. I've sent letters and don't know if he's read them. If he won't listen to the families, I will keep raising my voice, and I'll help other families raise theirs, so the public can hear us.

Trying to be a mom after an evil monster has taken your child, and learning to live with a part of your soul empty, is something there are no words for. The ripple effect of one man's choice

changes everyone's life, not just the family's. The innocence and safety of a family, friends, and a whole community are taken in that moment. Hearing that this monster's sentence could be swept away rips through my very soul.

Michael didn't get mercy. He didn't get a second chance, and no one changed his sentence. I have been speaking for victims and their families since 1996, because Michael deserved a lifetime and I will never let him be forgotten.

Governor Newsom, please look at Michael's face and say his name. Michael Lyons was eight years old. Before you make an irreversible decision, sit down with the families and hear what we went through. Please do not treat hundreds of different cases as one. This isn't about vengeance. It is about justice for Michael and for every family who trusted that a jury's verdict would stand.

Sandy Friend, mother of Michael Lyons