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Life Without Parole: An Inmate's Story

Robert Riley was a follower of the Grateful Dead who sometimes sold drugs to fellow Deadheads in the 1970s and '80s. Convicted several times for possession of small amounts of marijuana and amphetamines, he spent short periods in county jails in California and Wisconsin. In 1993, he was convicted in a federal court in Iowa of conspiring to distribute hits of LSD dissolved on pieces of blotter paper.



The weight of the LSD was minuscule, but prosecutors also counted the blotter paper's weight, putting it over a 10-gram threshold that — with the previous convictions — meant a mandatory life sentence without parole.

At the sentencing hearing, his lawyer complained that Mr. Riley was being punished more severely than most violent criminals, even murderers. Mr. Riley described mandatory drug sentences as “governmentally sanctioned, personalized terrorism” and said, “Hopefully after my death, someone will want to read this.” The judge, Ronald E. Longstaff, listened sympathetically.

“It's an unfair sentence,” Judge Longstaff said as he imposed it. Nine years later, in 2002, he wrote a letter supporting a petition for presidential clemency.

“There was no evidence presented in Mr. Riley's case to indicate that he was a violent offender or would be in the future,” the judge wrote. “It gives me no satisfaction that a gentle person such as Mr. Riley will remain in prison the rest of his life.”

The petition was not granted. Mr. Riley, now 60, has been behind bars for 19 years.