

## *'I Want to Be Forgiven. I Just Want to Be Forgiven.'*

When the Minnesota Board of Pardons meets, supplicants have 10 minutes to make the case for mercy.

By Dan Barry and Photographs By Todd Heisler

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The supplicants clustered outside the enormous closed doors. They paced the hallway, fidgeted on benches, knitted their hands and waited, waited, for their 10-minute chance at mercy.

A tall man in a sharp blazer, caught a quarter-century ago with 127 doses of LSD. A pony-tailed Navy veteran who critically injured someone while driving drunk in 2008. A burly man twice convicted of assaulting his wife, now sitting beside him. A former addict once found unconscious in a car, syringe jutting from his arm. Others dogged by the past.

They had come to the Minnesota capital of St. Paul on this steamy summer day to be forgiven. Restored. Redeemed.

The doors opened to reveal Minnesota officialdom personified: the governor, the attorney general and the state's chief justice — the three members of the Board of Pardons. They sat, unsmiling, at a long table facing a much smaller table that featured tissue boxes and a digital clock set at 10 minutes.

Ten minutes: the time allotted the supplicants to prove that they were worthy; that, like St. Paul, they had traveled their own rutted road to Damascus. This buzzer-beating pressure intensified a raw pardon process unlike those in most other states, with the powerless beseeching the powerful in public, and the decision rendered in the moment.



Mr. Lorge, who was convicted in 2005 of manufacturing methamphetamine, was prayed over at a church service a few days before meeting with the Minnesota Board of Pardons.

Among the powerless would be Jim Lorge, convicted in 2005 of manufacturing methamphetamine. Now a well-respected drug counselor and program director, he had been in recovery for 16 years, was engaged to be married and feared being forever defined by distant mistakes.

A pardon can mean better job and housing opportunities, the restoration of gun rights, the ability to chaperone school trips. But it can also offer something more intangible: the formal return to society's good graces.

"Do I have to carry this burden for the rest of my life?" Mr. Lorge, 48, asked before his hearing. "I want to be forgiven. I just want to be forgiven."

But formal forgiveness in Minnesota comes only through the pardon board and its de facto chairman, Gov. Tim Walz, 59, a retired high school teacher and former congressman. When he took office in 2019, his knowledge of his newfound pardon power came mostly from movies. "Theoretically, I understood," he said. "Operationally, no idea."

Now, with eight rounds of pardon hearings behind him and two days of hearings before him, the governor better understood the heartwarming, heartbreaking realities of this power of his. On the first day, the pardon hopes of citizens like Mr. Lorge, who long ago completed the sentence for his crimes yet continued to pay consequences. And on the second day, the commutation requests from inmates like Maureen Onyelobi, condemned to die in prison for her role in a premeditated murder, but whose exemplary rehabilitation included becoming the country's first incarcerated woman admitted to law school.

Two sides of the same coin of mercy.



Relatives of Anthony Fairbanks, flanked by victim advocates, testified against a commutation for Maureen Onyelobi, onscreen, serving a life sentence for her role in his murder.

With his fringe of white hair and charcoal-gray suit, the governor evoked an avuncular authority as he called the board to order. To his left sat Chief Justice Lorie Gildea, a conservative Republican. To his right, Attorney General Keith Ellison, like him a progressive Democrat. And before them now, people seeking grace.

“I remind folks in here that this is not a court of law,” the governor announced. “This is a Board of Pardons to take in those very human experiences.”

The first nervous supplicant took his place at the small table, and the eternal pursuit of mercy resumed.

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With the Minnesota State Capitol looming before him, an applicant seeking mercy checked in with the Board of Pardons in June.

No one can expect mercy. No one has the right to be forgiven. Pardons live beyond the parameters of the criminal code’s black-and-white text. They are, by nature, extraordinary.

Rooted in part in the ancient doctrine that monarchs derive power directly from God, pardons are a discretionary tool often given to the executive branch — the president and the governor — to override court-ordered sanctions: to shorten a prison sentence, restore civil rights or eliminate the obligation to identify oneself as a felon.

They are intended to provide relief from what Alexander Hamilton, in the Federalist Papers, called the “necessary severity” of the law — a kind of safety valve against injustices inherent in justice systems.

“Mercy is a requirement for justice, given how punishment actually operates in the world,” said Rachel Barkow, a New York University law professor who specializes in clemency law. “For us to assume there’s a concept of perfect justice, it means we would know how a person will evolve and change over time.”

There are other systems for restoring legal and social status, including diversion programs, expungement and record-sealing. Pardons, though, carry the emotional heft of society’s forgiveness. And depending on the jurisdiction, their application can be transparent or mysterious, reasoned or arbitrary — even questionable, with some reformers calling them a capricious relic.

President Bill Clinton issued 141 pardons on his last day in office, including one for a fugitive living in Switzerland who was wanted on tax-fraud charges and whose former wife had been a generous donor to Clinton-related causes. President Donald J. Trump pardoned various loyalists, including his former adviser, Stephen K. Bannon — before the man had even been tried on fraud charges related to the signature Trump issue of building a wall along the Southern border.

Mr. Trump is now both a 2024 presidential candidate *and* a defendant in two federal and two state criminal cases. Legal experts are divided on whether, if elected, he could pardon himself for a federal conviction.

Two generations ago, as drug-related violence plagued many cities, presidents and governors adopted tough-on-crime stances that, among other consequences, led to fewer pardons. The many social benefits that might accrue from mercy were determined not to be worth the political risk. According to the nonprofit Collateral Consequences Resource Center, the pardon became “a shadow of its once-robust self.”

“It is a national struggle in legislatures to figure out how to deal with this enormous number of people with a criminal record who can’t get jobs or housing,” said Margaret Love, the founder of the resource center and a former United States pardon lawyer. “We’re trying to reintegrate people, but we still won’t forgive them.”



The Board of Pardons, from left, consisted of Attorney General Keith Ellison, Gov. Tim Walz and Lorie Gildea, then chief justice. The board meets twice a year to hear testimony from applicants seeking to clear their names.

Like many other states, Minnesota has grappled with balancing accountability and compassion, and its pardon system has reflected that challenge. From 1983 through 2022, the pardon board granted slightly more than 800 pardons — in a state of 5.7 million residents.

But with the 2020 murder of a Black man, George Floyd, by a white Minneapolis police officer fresh in memory, advocates for criminal justice reform seized the moment when the like-minded Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party swept the governor's office, the House of Representatives and the Senate in last November's elections. By springtime, Mr. Walz had signed laws transforming how the state treated people with criminal records, including shortened probation for most felonies, an easier process for expunging the records of certain crimes and, beginning next year, changing the pardon process to make clemency more accessible.

This way, more people can “live where they want to, work where they want to, go hunting with their kids and grandkids,” said Mark Osler, a law professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis who helped draft the legislation. “But there's also the reconciliation between society and that individual. There's the mercy, the forgiveness and the wholeness that comes from that.”

One change went into effect immediately: the dropping of the high-bar requirement that a pardon be unanimous among the board's three members. Now petitioners like Mr. Lorge, former meth cook, and Ms. Onyelobi, prison lifer, needed only two votes to find relief — as long as one was cast by a regular-guy governor invested with the Minnesota version of a divine right.

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Mr. Lorge, 48, showed his mug shots while speaking to a church group. He is now a respected drug counselor.

An anxious Mr. Lorge thought that prayer might help. So, three days before his appointment with the pardon board, he gave witness at a Sunday service of the small Revive Church, in a public school cafeteria in the Twin Cities suburb of Forest Lake.

The service began with a few announcements — a rescheduled cookout, a singles lunch at the local Mexican restaurant — and some hymns. Then the worship leader introduced the guest speaker.

“Give him a hand, please.”

Mr. Lorge, in shorts and short-sleeve shirt, rose to face the audience. He stood 6 feet 2 inches with a shaved head and neat goatee. The cordless microphone looked small in his hand.

“I’m a retired meth cook,” he began.

Two decades ago, the Lorge family was prominent in the nearby town of North Branch. Jenny and Marvin Lorge owned a company that made transformers, with dozens of employees and their son, Jim, being groomed to inherit the business his father had started in the family basement. They lived in a large house with an in-ground pool and a yard sprawling to the Sunrise River. They attended Trinity Lutheran Church, rooted for the high school teams — Go Vikings! — and were among the “movers and shakers” of their community, Ms. Lorge recalled. “People knew us.”

Their son, a Boy Scout and class clown, started working for the family business while in grade school, progressing from floor sweeper to sales-and-management executive. By his early 20s, he was living in a neighboring town, serving as a volunteer firefighter and bouncing at a local roadhouse bar.



The shed where Mr. Lorge cooked methamphetamine at night belonged to his family’s business. His activities upended his parents’ lives.

One night, around 2000, a woman at the bar invited him to snort a hit of meth, the emerging drug of choice. “It just took me over,” he said, recalling how it seemed to transform him into a charming superman, able to get twice as much done in half the time while also losing weight. He felt invincible.

The local meth cook, gaunt and missing several teeth, was looking to hand off his lab equipment before going to prison. And here was the meth-beholden Mr. Lorge, whose family’s company bought solvents — essential for making meth — by the drum.

He loaded the equipment into his company-owned Chevy Tahoe. “I was so hooked on this that I was willing to take all of his supplies,” Mr. Lorge recalled, “and ignore the fact that he said he’s going to prison.”

Mr. Lorge became the local meth cook, skilled in a recipe requiring solvents, pseudoephedrine, lithium batteries and anhydrous ammonia. He worked for the family company by day and used its facilities as a meth lab by night, a daring double life that, more and more, proved erratic. He stole from the company and sometimes disappeared for days. When his mother found a glass pipe on his desk, he said it belonged to a friend of a friend.

On a cool July afternoon in 2003, law enforcement officials descended on the Lorge family’s business at shift change. Officers in hazmat suits were soon removing drug paraphernalia from a work shed — Pyrex coffee pots, hot plates, batteries, glass tubing — and laying it on the driveway to photograph.



Mr. Lorge praying at the church service. He has been in recovery for 16 years.

Jenny and Marvin Lorge had been planning to retire to Florida, where he could enjoy the water and she could concentrate on her painting and assemblage arts. All they could do was watch their business become a crime scene and their handcuffed son be shoved into a police car.

Now, at the church service, a reflection of those days appeared on a large screen that moments earlier had featured the lyrics of hymns: a triptych of Mr. Lorge's dead-eyed mug shots.

"That guy doesn't exist," he said. "But I'll never forget that guy."

A prayer leader summoned all the "men of God" in the room to come forward. Soon a dozen of them — one with a white beard, another wearing a backward baseball cap — were placing hands on the back and shoulders of Mr. Lorge, who closed his eyes.

"What time is your — is it Wednesday?" the leader asked.

"Wednesday," Mr. Lorge answered.

With bowed head, the leader prayed that though the man before them was redeemed in the eyes of God, with the Lord's help he would also be pardoned by "the earthly governors and authorities."

"Amen."

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At home, Mr. Lorge picked out an outfit the day before his hearing.

What do you wear when asking for mercy?

On the night before his appointment, Mr. Lorge hung a dark blazer and four dress shirts on cabinet handles near the kitchen and stepped back to assess his options. The dark blue shirt didn't go with any of the ties, many of them owned by his late father. Maybe the lavender shirt. Or the salmon.



“They need ironing,” he said.

“I don’t think you should wear the salmon,” said his mother, rising from a cluttered table to pair the ties and shirts. “You’d look like a casino dealer.”

“Now I’m worried about pants,” he said.

Mr. Lorge lived with his mother and teenage son in her cramped two-bedroom condominium in Forest Lake. The sunroom had become his bedroom, where he hadn’t been sleeping well, his mind whirring with what to say to the pardon board. How could he sum up 23 white-knuckled years in 10 minutes?



Mr. Lorge pored over his presentation to the Board of Pardons. He would work on it until the morning of his hearing.

Two years after his arrest, Mr. Lorge pleaded guilty to manufacturing methamphetamine and received a stayed prison sentence and lengthy probation. Nothing changed. He fell asleep at business meetings, faked commitment to drug treatment, submitted someone else’s urine when tested, used his cancer-stricken father’s pain meds — and kept taking meth.

He married a woman with her own drug issues; they soon separated, then learned that she was pregnant. For his first Father’s Day, in 2006, Mr. Lorge fell asleep surrounded by drug paraphernalia and his baby boy.

In the spring of 2007, Mr. Lorge was arrested for violating probation. By now his toddler son was in the custody of the state’s child protection agency, his father was dying and his exasperated mother was insisting that he be imprisoned.

“My absolute bottom,” he recalled.

But the judge at his violation hearing chose to give one more chance to this large man weeping before him. He sentenced Mr. Lorge to four months in the county jail and consented to send him to a faith-based long-term treatment program now called Minnesota Adult & Teen Challenge.

The program redirected Mr. Lorge's life. During his 13 months of inpatient care, he terminated his parental rights and persuaded his mother, nearly 60, to adopt his son to avoid foster care. He lost his father. Paid off his court fines. Stayed sober.



After completing treatment in 2008, Mr. Lorge moved in with his mother, Jenny, right, and his son. He returned to a faith-based long-term treatment program as an on-call recovery coach.

After completing treatment in 2008, Mr. Lorge moved in with his mother and son and returned to Teen Challenge as an on-call recovery coach. He rose quickly through its ranks, overseeing treatment programs, conducting dozens of trainings and becoming known for deftly handling difficult cases of addiction.

Still, he lived amid the collateral damage. Take his mother, busy now helping him choose an outfit.

Instead of retiring, she watched her husband sell the family business and lose the proceeds in a motorcycle company that he thought, wrongly, would engage Jim enough to end his addiction. She nursed her dying husband while their son smoked meth in the basement, felt ostracized in her community and lost her home to foreclosure. At times she considered suicide.

Now, at 74, Ms. Lorge was selling real estate. The seashells, horseshoe crab molts and other mementos adorning her overcrowded condo hinted of the Florida life she might have had. "This wouldn't have happened if Jim hadn't gone off the rails," she said.

Mr. Lorge's addiction had upended the lives of his parents, his sister, his son, his family's employees and so many others. Remorse defined him.

“I made such a bad name for my family,” he said. “I disgraced them.”

But he had worked hard to make amends and repair relationships, and was now so straight that he’d played pickleball with a deputy sheriff who once arrested him. A pardon, he said, would provide paper proof that he had righted the foundering ship that was Jim Lorge.

“Everyone else in my life that I’ve wronged has forgiven me,” Mr. Lorge said. “Now I just need the State of Minnesota to do the same.”

He paced the small condo, and in so doing seemed to take up even more space. His appointment with the pardon board was less than 24 hours away, and he hadn’t figured out what to wear, much less what to say.

His fiancée, Cindy Zumwalt, arrived to reassure him. They drove to a Kohl’s department store and bought a pair of pants and a discounted tie. It was a \$60 investment in their future.

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Walter Hooper, 41, with his wife, Patricia, by his side, sought a pardon for offenses committed in his youth.

First on the pardon board agenda was a bridge painter for the City of St. Paul: Walter Hooper, 41, who had waited two hours in the hallway, his many arm tattoos covering up what he called the “mistake tattoos” of his difficult past.

Records showed that at 16, Mr. Hooper punched a boy while trying to rob him, and, at 17, punched another boy and later shook him down for pocket change. There were other offenses: escaping from custody, cashing two forged checks for \$150, using a credit card in a found wallet to buy a television.

Records also showed that he bounced around foster homes and juvenile detention facilities as a child, was homeless at 12, ate food out of trash cans and lived amid drugs and alcohol. That he had been in the painters union for 18 years and with his wife, Patricia, for 15. That they were raising five children.

Voice quavering, Mr. Hooper explained that he hadn't written anything down because "I wanted to come straight from who I am." He said that he had taken responsibility for his actions and resolved long ago to be a role model for his children.

The attorney general had a question.

Mr. Ellison, 60, a prominent civil rights leader, became the first Muslim elected to Congress, in 2006. After serving six terms, he was elected the Minnesota attorney general in 2018 and led the successful prosecution of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who had murdered Mr. Floyd during an arrest.



Mr. Hooper hugging his wife after the hearing. He said he had long ago resolved to be a role model for his children.

Like the governor, he had been taken aback by his profound responsibilities as a pardon board member. The process brought to mind his late mother, Clida, a Detroit social worker who had spent many years counseling teenagers who had committed horrific crimes. "She believed in mercy, and she believed in second chances," he said several weeks before the hearing. "And I don't think my mother even jaywalked."

It seemed to him that forgiveness had fallen from favor, that showing mercy somehow meant being soft on crime. "We're not soft on crime," he said. "What we recognize is, we all are flawed. And at the same time, there's got to be accountability."

"We can have both," he said.

Now the attorney general posed his question to the chastened bridge painter: “Could you talk a little bit more, these many years later, about how you feel about what you did to those folks?”

A sigh picked up by the mic resounded through the room. Soon Mr. Hooper was sobbing, as that moment near the high school a quarter-century ago, when he menaced and punched a boy named Dave, became fresh again.

He said he knew how hard it had been for that boy to rebuild trust in others because his own son had also been beaten up. “I know I affected him that way,” Mr. Hooper said. “You know? Because I know my son was affected that way. You know?”

“Thank you, sir,” the attorney general replied softly.

The vote was taken. Chief Justice Gildea, who would soon retire from the bench with a reputation for by-the-book strictness, said no. But Mr. Walz and Mr. Ellison said yes — which, under the new rule eliminating the need for board unanimity, was enough.

“Your pardon has been granted, Mr. Hooper,” the governor said. “I wish you the best of luck.”

Mr. Hooper slumped and covered his weeping in the crook of a tattooed arm. His lightened body shook.

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Mr. Lorge with his family as he waited to plead his case.

Others followed. One after another, through the morning and into the afternoon, reflecting what Mr. Walz called the reality that a felon could be “the dude who’s been living next to you for 20 years” without incident.

People with felony records in Minnesota must wait five years after completing their sentences and probation to apply for a pardon — 10 years if their cases involved violence or serious drug crimes. (The new legislation cuts this to five years beginning in 2024.) Beyond that, it's mostly common sense, according to Gina Evans, an advocate for corrections reform who years ago received a pardon for several drug-related crimes.

For example, do not relitigate the case with assertions of wrongful conviction. Also, leave nothing out. "If you've had a speeding ticket in St. Cloud or San Francisco, they will look and they will find it."

Dress appropriately. And when submitting letters of support, include praise from your employer or probation officer, not from a family member. "We all know your momma loves you," Ms. Evans said. "Nobody cares."

Here was the pony-tailed Navy veteran, 54, who once drove into an oncoming car while intoxicated, seriously injuring its driver. He had completed probation, done community service, avoided drugs and alcohol — and written to the board that a pardon would help him reintegrate into society "as a complete individual."

Words fell short, he said, but he apologized for the harm he had caused.

Saying you're sorry might seem inadequate at times, Mr. Ellison said. "But it's amazing how far apologies go."

Pardon granted unanimously.



The governor of Minnesota has signed laws changing the pardon process to make clemency more accessible.

Here was an Uber driver, 41, whose four convictions from two decades ago included slashing her estranged husband. She said she had stayed out of trouble, undergone therapy and just wanted better opportunities for her family, including a child with autism.

But the board was troubled that no one had come in support; she explained that her daughter had to care for a dying dog and her fiancé had to work. The governor also noted that she hadn't mentioned the conviction for threatening to blow up a homeless shelter — a misunderstanding, she said.

"I don't want to be in trouble," said the woman, weary and so alone at the small table. "I'm old. I'm 42 years old. Like, I'm not going back."

Still: pardon denied.

Each back story, shared in court filings and 10 minutes of pleading, was its own epic — studies in failure and misjudgment, redemption and triumph, continuing struggle.

That heroin addict once found unconscious in his car with a syringe in his arm, now sober and married, with twins. A Laotian immigrant convicted of criminal sexual conduct after his 14-year-old girlfriend — his "cultural wife," his lawyer said — gave birth; decades later, they were married, with four children. A music teacher who embezzled \$41,000 from her employer at the behest of an abusive husband; in her application, she wrote, "I have lived in shame for most of my life and it would be nice if you'd help me end this."

All three received pardons.

According to Ms. Evans, a pardon application should convey accountability, remorse, restitution and rehabilitation. But be prepared to be baffled by the arbitrariness of it all — the denial of a pardon, say, to someone who hadn't committed a crime in more than a decade.

"How do you say no?" Ms. Evans asked. "How do you deny them a better quality of life?"



Trace Ludwig, 41, left, before the board with a supporter. He served about 17 months for forging checks and other crimes, after which he became a dedicated volunteer and developed a career in food service management.

A man named Trace Ludwig, 41, took his place before the board, anxious but certain he had done all he could. Very tall and dressed in a blue suit, he carried a brown document holder and the memory of crying before the board in 2013, when he was denied a pardon but was invited to return.

In interviews before his hearing, Mr. Ludwig described his childhood as a foster-care blur. He said that he had struggled with his sexual identity — he is gay — and that untreated mental illness had led to a spree of theft, compulsive behavior and substance abuse. From 2000 to 2006, he betrayed the trust of many friends, stealing identities, forging checks, running up thousands of dollars in charges, ruining credit scores.

All told, he served about 17 months in prison, after which he developed a career in food service management. He earned a college degree, provided job training to the incarcerated and became a dedicated volunteer — raising money for foster children, helping families with food insecurity and presiding over an outreach group for people affected by the criminal justice system.

“I’ve worked hard,” he said.

Speaking now to the board, Mr. Ludwig’s voice trembled as he described undergoing treatment and recommitting himself to his faith. His application included rave references from law enforcement and probation officials, as well as from a supporter sitting beside him whose deceased mother had been one of his victims. Two other victims had written to oppose a pardon, but another had written that we should not be defined by our “darkest day.”

Still, the board clearly struggled with Mr. Ludwig’s failure to provide full restitution, even though it would later pardon another applicant who had also been unable to pay back her victim. When he explained that he had paid thousands of dollars in restitution, then devoted himself to community work because college debt and other challenges had “hindered my ability to fully meet all my financial obligations,” the governor sympathized, but said: “Their credit was ruined. Hard to get a house. Insurance rates go up. Many of them for decades probably ended up paying because of that.”

And Mr. Ellison, the attorney general, said: “I want to commend you on doing a lot of good things and changing things around. For me, just the, just the, just the — prolific nature of this stuff. It’s just a little bit daunting, you know?”

The vote was two-to-one against a pardon, with only Mr. Walz in favor. (“A tough one,” he would later say.)

“Your pardon has been denied,” the governor said. “I thank you and encourage you to keep up the good work.”

Stunned and flushed, Mr. Ludwig hurried from the room. All that good work, but not good enough for Minnesota — at least not yet.

“Still plenty to digest to see what I do next,” Mr. Ludwig wrote in an email later that night. “Going to rest for now and continue the work I do.”



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Mr. Lorge, a clock ticking away before him, had 10 minutes to speak to the board.

“Up next, Mr. James Lorge,” the governor announced.

The former meth cook from Chisago County unclasped his fiancée’s hand and made his way to the dock, where the clock’s 10:00 glowed red. He sat down and unfolded a pair of glasses that made him look professorial.

He had once manufactured a drug that in some forms looked, appropriately, like fragments of shattered glass. Long-term use could lead to paranoia, extreme weight loss, anxiety, serious dental problems, profound cognitive damage and, possibly, death.

“When I began using meth in my mid-20s, I had no idea of the devastation it would cause in my life,” he said, reading from a statement he had been rewriting as late as that morning. “The drug consumed me and changed me into a person who was no longer recognizable to my family and friends.”

At this moment the large, bald man from Minnesota, wearing a blue blazer, lavender shirt and patterned tie bought at discount, joined a pursuit that reached back through American history to the beginnings of humankind.

Before George Washington issued the first presidential pardons in 1795, to men implicated in the Whiskey Rebellion. Before King Ine of Wessex exercised his “prerogative of mercy” during his medieval reign. Before Clementia, goddess of mercy, appeared on Roman coins. Back to the earliest clans recognizing that harmonious community required forgiveness.



Mr. Lorge hugged his mother after his hearing.

Mr. Lorge's words, halting at first, gained force as he spoke. Expressing remorse for the harm he had caused, he said he had spent the past 16 years making amends, including by dedicating his life to counseling others with addiction.

A pardon, he said, would help him and his fiancée find better housing and allow him to volunteer at school activities involving their blended family. It would also send the encouraging message to his struggling clients that “we can change our outcomes and eventually remove the label of felon.”

The three board members listened, stone-faced. Their expressions did not change as two other speakers praised Mr. Lorge for his transformation and good works.

When it was over, Mr. Lorge retreated to the hall and wiped his reddened eyes. He received reassuring hugs from his fiancée, whom he planned to marry in the fall, and his teenage son, whom he had nearly lost, and his weeping mother, whose life he had turned upside down. She hugged tight.

Together, they walked down a long flight of marble steps and out into sunlight. For the rest of the day and well into the next, he sent the same text to the many people in his restored life. All it said was:

“I got the pardon.”

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Ms. Onyelobi, 38, appeared before the board through a video feed from the women's prison in Shakopee, Minn.

The woman sat at a long blond table, documents and tissues within reach. Wearing large glasses and a state-issue blue shirt, she was appearing before the pardon board through a video feed from the women's prison in Shakopee. Because of the camera's placement, she was peering up, as if in hope.

This was Maureen Onyelobi, 38, the first of four inmates seeking commutation of their sentences on the second and final day of the board's summer hearings. All four were making their pleas remotely, from prison; all four had been involved in murder.

Ms. Onyelobi was serving life without release after a 2014 conviction for being an accomplice in the premeditated shooting of a man her incarcerated boyfriend feared would testify against him. At his behest, the state said, she helped lure the victim, her boyfriend's co-defendant in a federal drug case, with the promise of drugs and then tried to cover up the murder.

She had since been featured in the national media, including on "PBS NewsHour," for being the nation's first woman in prison to attend law school. Her case had become a cause célèbre, reflected by the many supporters and law school classmates now filing through the just-opened doors.

Mr. Walz began by briefly discussing the "sovereign's prerogative of mercy" embodied by the board. "The idea of mercy and forgiveness and fresh starts guides us in our society," the governor said, weighed as it is against "the other side of the ledger, with victims who are asking, What is the justice for their lost loved ones?"

Ms. Onyelobi listened with hands in her lap. She had been nervously preparing for this hearing, including with prayers in the visitors' room the day before with her father, her younger sister and a close friend. Their presence recalled where she had come from, Chicago, and how far she was from ever returning.



A photo of Ms. Onyelobi, upper left, in the offices of the Legal Revolution, the organization that has helped her pursue a law degree from prison.

The second of three daughters of Nigerian immigrants — her father a laborer, her mother a Chicago bus driver — she had been severely burned in a house fire when she was 10; earned two college degrees, in communications and in English; cared for her dying mother; fallen in love with her marijuana dealer; and followed him, fatefully, to Minneapolis, where she drove a school bus, occasionally chauffeured him on his heroin-selling rounds, and, she said, covered under his physical and psychological abuse.

“I was lost,” Ms. Onyelobi would say. “I was so tiny.”

Her lawyer, Perry Moriearty, a University of Minnesota law professor and justice reform advocate, began by acknowledging cold facts in the murder of Anthony Fairbanks, 23, who had been shot in the head and left in a snowbank. Her client, she said, had driven to the murder scene with the shooter, left with the shooter, hidden the gun in her storage locker and initially lied to the police.

Still, Ms. Moriearty argued, Ms. Onyelobi’s life sentence was excessive. The gunman, who had sworn in a signed affidavit that she had no foreknowledge of the murder, had taken a plea bargain for a lighter sentence with the promise of release. Ms. Onyelobi, meanwhile, received a sentence of mandatory death in prison after exercising her right to a trial.

In requesting a reduction of Ms. Onyelobi's sentence to what effectively would be nearly 15 years — she had served nine — the lawyer cited mitigating factors, including the boyfriend's abusive control. She also noted that her client, a student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, in St. Paul, had been praised by prison officials as a leader and mentor — a model inmate's model.

“Commutation does not absolve a person of their crime, and Ms. Onyelobi does not seek absolution today,” Ms. Moriearty said. “She fully appreciates the gravity of her conduct.”

Still, she said, the Minnesota Constitution allows applicants to seek mercy when they deserve “mitigation of the rigor of the law,” and “Ms. Onyelobi is deserving of such mercy.”



Family members of Mr. Fairbanks grieved as they testified against Ms. Onyelobi at her hearing.

Ms. Onyelobi then spoke. Her unsteady words echoed through the hearing room, 35 miles and a chasm away from the Shakopee prison.

“I want to begin with the most important thing I have to say,” she said. “To the family of Anthony Fairbanks, I’m deeply sorry for my role in his death. Your son, your father, your brother — he should still be here. And there is no amount of words that I can say to bring him back. The pain that I caused his family is unimaginable.”

Ms. Onyelobi said she took responsibility for her role in the murder. She said that prison had saved her life; that she was committed to her Christian faith and to restorative justice programs; that she hoped to use her legal training to help others receive a second chance.

“No matter what the board decides today, I just want you to know that I am grateful, and I will spend every day trying to make amends for the crime — for my crime — and the harm that I’ve caused,” she said. “Thank you for the opportunity. Thank you.”

After a pause, the governor invited anyone wishing to speak “on behalf of Mr. Anthony Fairbanks, the victim.” Four solemn women in the audience began making their way to the small table facing the pardon board: the mother and three other relatives of the murder victim.

For the next 15 minutes, they provided a chorus of grief, loss, anger and not a note of forgiveness.

They described the victim as an anchor in his Native American community, a basketball coach and good father to two boys who was killed just days before he was to enter treatment for substance abuse. They described having anxiety attacks, and needing to cry in the shower or pull to the side of the road, nearly a decade after his murder.

“Tomorrow is Anthony’s birthday,” a cousin said, weeping. “He would have been 33 years old.”

With Ms. Onyelobi listening from Shakopee, her face contorted in pain, they described her as unremorseful and self-involved. They cited a recorded jailhouse conversation in which she seemed to assure her insistent boyfriend that the situation would be addressed that fateful night.

“She knows what she did,” said the mother, Triva Radhakrishnan.

Sitting in the distant prison conference room, her supportive prison warden and case manager just off-camera, Ms. Onyelobi felt helpless, unable under board rules to respond. She couldn’t tell the family that while she hadn’t apologized at sentencing — she was still in denial, she said — she *had* submitted a letter of apology well before the hearing that they clearly hadn’t seen. Nor could she tell them how, after being attacked by an inmate claiming to be a Fairbanks relative, “I felt like I *should* have gotten assaulted.”

The women expressed particular frustration with the admiring news coverage centered on Ms. Onyelobi. “Just because she’s getting this education and a law degree still does not change the fact that she’s a coldblooded murderer,” an aunt said. “She put everything into action. Everything.”

The four women returned to their seats in a room hushed by their words.

The testimony of crime victims can so overwhelm a hearing that some criminal justice experts wonder whether other forums — restorative justice sessions, for example — might be fairer. “Often, the families haven’t had a process to express their grief and their hurt,” said Kevin Reese, the co-founder of Until We Are All Free, a prison reform organization in Minneapolis. “And that becomes their stage.”

Others say there is no more appropriate forum than a hearing like this — to ensure that the long-lasting consequences of a crime, especially one of violence, are not forgotten.

But Ms. Onyelobi said she thought the women, especially Mr. Fairbanks’s mother, deserved this opportunity to speak, even though their words worked against her. “I wanted them to feel heard,” she said later. “What they needed to say, they had to say.”

Chief Justice Gildea had no questions. Mr. Ellison expressed his condolences to the Fairbanks family and admitted that he was trying to make up his mind “as I’m sitting here.” He said that while Ms. Onyelobi’s crime “mandates a significant sentence,” she should not be serving a harsher sentence than the man who pulled the trigger.

The governor also thought out loud, saying that “the loss of hope is a dangerous thing” and noting that both the judge and the prosecutor in Ms. Onyelobi’s criminal case supported some form of commutation. “An individual like Ms. Maureen Onyelobi can carry out a horrific crime, begin to pay a price for that and change where she’s at,” Mr. Walz said. “But the other truth of this is — and you could feel it — time is frozen for the Fairbanks family.”



Mr. Lorge's pardon letter from the State of Minnesota.

Hours later, his pardon work done, the governor would return to his office in the landmark State Capitol, where everything down to the gold-rimmed coaster beneath his can of Diet Mountain Dew underscored his role as the quasi-sovereign of Minnesota. Just as Jim Lorge, former meth dealer, had represented seekers of mercy through the ages, so, too, did Tim Walz stand for those empowered over the millennia to dispense it.

Sitting at a long mahogany table, the governor would recount certain moments from the last two days, moments of joy and of pain. He and his two board colleagues had granted 17 pardon requests, denied three others and left the three other imprisoned supplicants with some measure of relief. They had granted mercy and withheld mercy.

He would recall attending a Joan Osborne concert years ago at a women's prison with his wife, Gwen, a prison education advocate, and how moved he had been by hearing the incarcerated crowd join in singing the musician's anthem, "One of Us." He would even recite part of the chorus:

*What if God was one of us*

*Just a slob like one of us*

These reflections over a Mountain Dew were hours away. At this moment, Mr. Walz was still a regular-guy governor in the midst of wielding a godlike power, trying to find justice for the devastated Fairbanks family, for the incarcerated Ms. Onyelobi and for society. In asking himself what justice would look like, he had decided that "you just try to do the best you can."

For several minutes the pardon board's members and staff seemed to measure justice in terms of time — the amount already served and the amount still needing to be served. All the while, Ms. Onyelobi, her future in the balance, peered up, remaining so still that the live feed from prison seemed frozen.

Finally, the governor made a motion to commute her death-in-prison sentence to one less punitive. With a yes, a yes and another yes, the motion passed, meaning that freedom had become achievable for Ms. Onyelobi — but not before she had served at least 21 more years. For her, a disappointing decision flecked with hope.

The live feed was cut, and the law student of Shakopee prison vanished from sight.

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