

THE SENTENCE, A SEARING LOOK AT THE CONSEQUENCES OF
MANDATORY-MINIMUM SENTENCING FOR ONE FAMILY,
DEBUTS OCT. 15 ON HBO

Cindy Shank received a mandatory 15-year prison sentence for conspiracy charges related to crimes committed by her deceased ex-boyfriend – a situation known in legal terms as “the girlfriend problem.” To cope with this tragedy, her brother, Rudy Valdez, filmed her family for her, both the everyday details and the milestones – moments Cindy herself can no longer share. In the midst of the nightmare, during the final months of the Obama administration’s clemency initiative, Valdez and his family began to fight for her release.

Winner of the Audience Award at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, the intimate documentary **THE SENTENCE** takes a searing look at the impact of mandatory-minimum sentencing on one family when it debuts **MONDAY, OCT. 15 (8:00-9:30 p.m. ET/PT)**, exclusively on HBO.

The documentary will also be available on HBO On Demand, HBO NOW, HBO GO and partners’ streaming platforms.

Rudy Valdez’s directorial debut, **THE SENTENCE** draws on hundreds of hours of footage to tell the story of a Michigan woman who was sentenced to 15 years for crimes committed by her late boyfriend, following a family in crisis as it struggles to obtain her release.

Spanning a decade, the documentary combines home movies, frank interviews and candid moments with family members, and recordings of Cindy’s phone calls from prison. Part of a close-knit family of six from Lansing, Mich., whose parents had previously been migrant workers, Cindy had been doing well until her boyfriend, Alex, started dealing drugs. After Alex was murdered, she was at first charged for the drugs found in the house, but the state dropped its case against her.

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Cindy moved on, married in 2003, and had three daughters: Autumn, Ava and Annalis. But six years after the initial case against her, and six weeks after giving birth to her third daughter, she was arrested for conspiracy, with the state arguing she could be charged with any crimes Alex committed while they lived together. Cindy was found guilty at trial, receiving a mandatory minimum sentence of 15 years.

2008: Cindy calls her husband, Adam, and their girls from prison, wishing Autumn good luck before a dance recital and crying because she can't be there with her family. Moments like this, captured on camera, depict the harrowing experience of her daughters growing up without their mother.

Rudy Valdez speaks with litigator Marjorie Pearce, who notes that while mandatory minimums were once unconstitutional, the practice has grown in recent years, with thousands of people like Cindy, who once led productive lives, being incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses.

While the family accepts that Cindy may be culpable, they believe the punishment far exceeds the crime. "Just because Cindy was a good person and she really turned her life around, and she was going in the right direction, does not mean that she wasn't guilty. And we're willing to accept that," says Rudy Valdez. "What we cannot wrap our heads around as a family, as her brother, as her children, is the sentence that she received. There has to be a better way to deal with this that is beneficial to everyone, that is fair, that is just." Observes Cindy, "Missing my daughters grow up: That's what I was sentenced to."

2011: Cindy is moved to a prison in Florida, which means much of the family will only be able to travel from Michigan once a year to see her. Cindy's mom has visited often, but her dad, older brother and sister have visited less, because it's too difficult for them to see her in prison.

Meanwhile, Rudy continues his advocacy for Cindy, speaking to policy consultant Duchy Trachtenberg, who says "the girlfriend problem," as Cindy's situation is known,

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“speaks to the failure of government.” He also contacts Tatjana Misulic, a pro bono lawyer who notes that Cindy is one of 36,000 to apply for clemency from the Obama administration, though only a small percentage will have their requests granted.

2014: The girls are ten, eight and six. Now in Kentucky, Cindy says her memories of the girls are slipping away, but hangs on to the fact that although she missed early milestones, she’ll be there for proms, graduations and weddings.

2016: Autumn, now 13, admits, “It’s been tough the last nine years,” noting that her mom’s calls and letters aren’t the same as having her there. As the final days of the Obama administration draw near, Cindy and the family anxiously wait to see if her name will be on the clemency list – and whether she will be granted the opportunity to be reunited with her family and restart her life.

THE SENTENCE is directed by Rudy Valdez; executive producers, Wendy Neu, Lance Acord, Theodora Dunlap; produced by Sam Bisbee, Jackie Kelman Bisbee; edited by Viridiana Lieberman; co-producers, Geeta Gandbhir, April Hayes; written by Rudy Valdez, Viridiana Lieberman; original music by Sam Bisbee; director of photography, Rudy Valdez.

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