

Inmate who was wrongly released says he deserves parole

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HENDERSON, Texas - Willis Reed's 11 months in the free world were nothing short of a gift. One he shouldn't have gotten - even if he did use it well.

Reed served five years in prison for carjacking a man at a Lake Highlands 7-Eleven. After his release, he went on to live a life he'd only imagined: He enrolled in college, bought his first car and got married. Most important, he stayed out of trouble.

But Reed never should have been released. He was ordered back to prison after it was discovered that a clerk accidentally recorded his 14-year sentence as five years.

"There was so much I wanted to do, that I'd just dreamed of doing," Reed said, speaking from behind a glass window and through a phone at the Bradshaw State Jail. "I just don't understand. ... I just wanted my freedom."

Reed has been back in custody since January after being released in February 2009. He now spends eight hours a day working in the commissary.

And then the ultimate insult: Despite being free and a good citizen for almost a year, a few months after he was sent back to the slammer, the state denied him parole.

"If I was out there 341 days, and I was doing the right thing ...," he says, his voice trailing off. His prison uniform is several sizes too big; the shirt is bright tangerine but the pants have faded to peach. "I thought at least I was going to come here and get paroled."

He carries with him the papers that show he was released - and the letter refusing his parole in June. It says he's too likely to reoffend.

Reed scoffs at that.

Reed, wistful at times, but also mad, said he wonders if the parole board didn't realize he'd spent time outside prison behaving himself. His records show he was credited with serving prison time during the period when he was actually free - he got credit for the time because the error was not his fault.

Reed and his mother, Yvonne Bass of Mansfield, said they believe that because the error was made by Dallas County and written into the court's record, he should be required to serve only the five-year sentence.

"I was so happy having my son home, seeing him get his life together," said Bass. "It's frustrating. The court system is messed up."

'There's no remedy'

State District Judge Fred Tinsley and the Dallas County district attorney's office said Reed must serve his original sentence. Although Tinsley, whom Reed blames for the error, did say he thought Reed would be paroled.

"I wonder why they did that," the judge said. "I was surprised they denied him parole."

Tinsley said the error that led to Reed's early release was made by a clerk in training. Reed was sentenced to 14 years for aggravated robbery and five to be served concurrently for being a felon in possession of a firearm. But the clerk recorded five years for each charge.

Reed said that when he found out he was being released, he told prison authorities he didn't believe that was right. He said they checked with Dallas County and were told the five-year sentence was correct.

Defense attorneys asked by The Dallas Morning News to review the case - Debbie Sanchez and Bill Wirskye - say there's nothing in the law that would let Reed serve only the five years.

"Generally, when the oral pronouncement of sentence conflicts with the written judgment, the oral pronouncement controls," Sanchez said.

Wirskye said he would help Reed if there was something he could do.

"There's no remedy. Your heart may go out to him because he got tossed around by the system," Wirskye said. "But, for a time, he also benefited. I hope he doesn't become embittered by the experience and continues the good, productive behavior he had for the time was out."

Big dreams

Reed was also convicted at age 19 of two 1994 robberies in Tarrant County and was sentenced to eight years in prison. He said he's changed since then - that it took two trips to prison and an unexpected and undeserved release for him to learn from his mistakes.

"I was very young, and there was a lot of bad crowds I was hanging out with," he said, adding that he fell back into old patterns when he was released for the Tarrant County crimes. "My mind wasn't right. I felt invincible and I hung out with the bad crowd again."

Reed said that when he was released from prison after serving five years for the carjacking, he felt different. He knew that if he wanted what he had never had - a car, his own place, a wife - he would have to change.

He enrolled in Tarrant County College and wanted to become a marriage counselor. He said he gives good advice, even though he doesn't always make the best choices himself.

Reed also married a fellow student, Laetitia Nana Wouantou.

Wouantou, who could not be reached for comment, has since filed for divorce.

"She's a little mad. Frustrated, more or less," Reed said. "As soon as I got here, she filed."

Reed said he hasn't heard from her since he was rearrested in January.

Police asked to see his ID when they were at his apartment building to investigate a domestic disturbance. Reed wasn't involved but was stopped on his way to do laundry.

They checked his criminal history and found out that authorities were looking for him because he should not have been released.

Victim's thoughts

The man Reed carjacked in 2002, Van Lane, didn't know Reed was released by error.

"Boy, that's something," Lane said. "I think about him every once in awhile. What a pathetic life. He went to prison when he was 19."

Lane said Reed robbed him as he was coming out of a 7-Eleven on a Sunday morning. Lane saw Reed talking on a pay phone as he entered the store. When Lane came out, he said Reed approached him and started saying something he didn't understand.

Then, Lane said he saw a gun in Reed's waistband. Lane began to back away.

When Reed pointed the gun at his chest, Lane said he realized Reed was saying, "Give me your keys." Lane tossed the keys toward the front of the car and ran.

Lane said he isn't sure whether he would oppose Reed's parole.

"If he gets out on parole, I hope he can change his life," Lane said. "I'm skeptical."

Defense attorney Bill Knox, hired by Reed's wife for a few days until she called to say Reed didn't need an attorney, said he's still intrigued by the case. He and his son, Chris Knox, a recent law school graduate, have been brainstorming ways to help Reed, even though they aren't getting paid.

Their only viable solution is to make sure the parole board has records of his time in the free world, and sees records of his time in college.

"I think if the parole board knew what happened, they would look at it favorably," Bill Knox said. "I'm not sure legally he has the right to be out. But it's the fair thing to do."

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