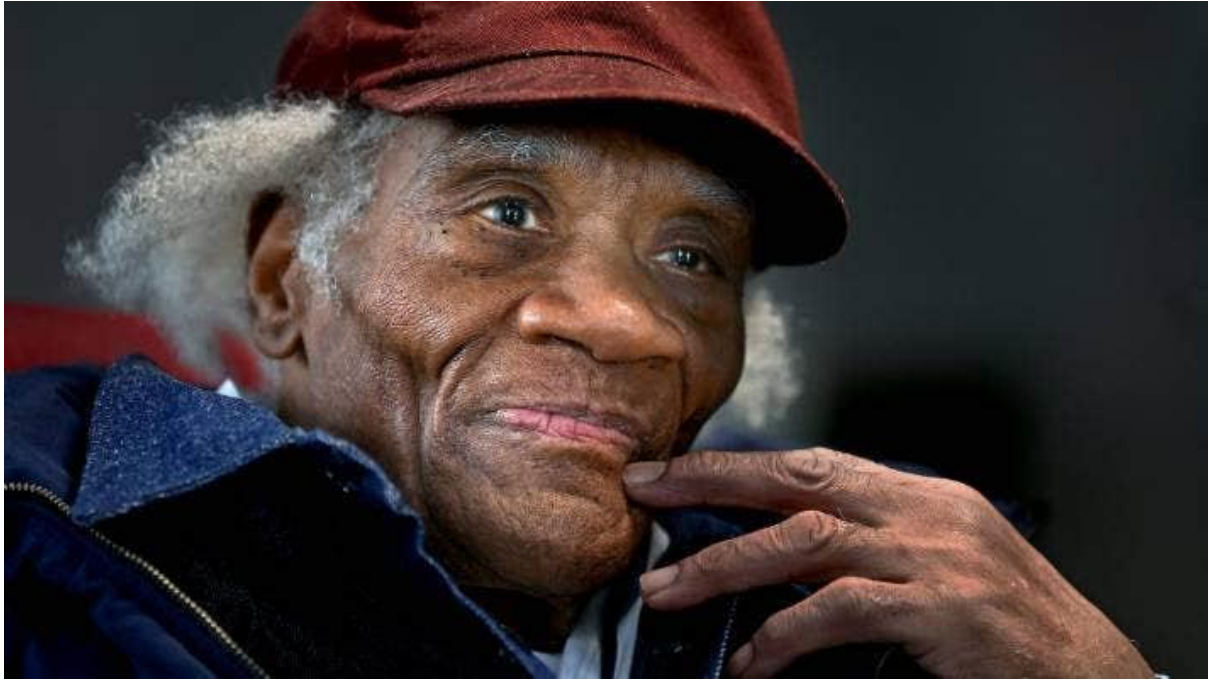


After 68 years behind bars, the longest-serving juvenile lifer in the US embraces freedom

Karen Heller 18:47, Feb 21 2021



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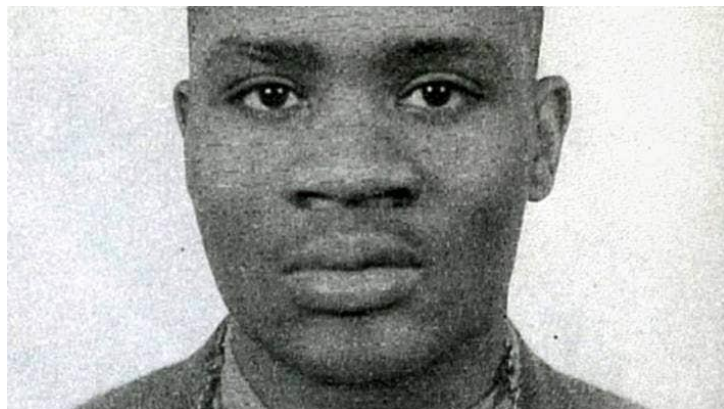
Juvenile offender Joe Ligon has been released after 68 years behind bars in Pennsylvania.

On a snow-flecked morning earlier this month, Joe Ligon stepped from his lawyer's car, his gait deliberate yet steady, his hair as white as cotton.

A few hours before, he had eaten a breakfast of pancakes, two bowls of cereal, no milk, his final meal in prison.

"This is no sad day for me," he said. "Feel real good. Like a dream come true. I anticipated this from day one."

What was Ligon looking forward to? "A better everything."



Joe Ligon is pictured in 1963, 10 years into his prison sentence.

The son of Alabama sharecroppers, Ligon entered prison when Dwight Eisenhower was president. During the 68 years that he spent incarcerated in a half dozen penal institutions, the world outside moved on.

At the one-day trial in 1953, Ligon and his co-defendants were referred to as “coloured.” At school, his special education classes were designated for the “orthogenically backward.” He was incarcerated in a facility named the Pennsylvania Institution for Defective Delinquents in the US, the inmates classified by courts “as mentally defective with criminal tendencies.”

Ligon, 83, has never had his own place, operated a cellphone, paid a bill, cast a ballot, earned the minimum wage, lived with a partner, fathered children.

While he was locked up, almost all of his family died, most of the men to murder. All he has left is a sister, some nieces and nephews. This was his central sadness: “It would have been much better if I had come out when my parents were still alive.”



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Joe Ligon, left, takes a tour of his new neighbourhood with John Pace, a former juvenile lifer himself who works as a re-entry coordinator for the Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project.

Ligon was 15 on that wretched night, when everything went wrong. Now, he was an old man with few teeth - but an old man who was free and, given the circumstances, in remarkably good health. He doesn't take any pills except vitamins.

"I feel real good. One reason for that is because I'm out. I'm home," Ligon said. "When you get life, you have no hope, especially if you give up. You don't make plans like I made plans." His plans were always to be free.

That February night, Ligon and five other teenagers drained two bottles of wine, ripped through the streets of South Philadelphia near his home, and stabbed eight men, two of whom died.

It was the first time he ever drank, he has said. They were teens, being stupid and then horrible. The murders made all the front pages, the teens dubbed "the Head Hunters," though Ligon insisted "we were no gang."



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Joe Ligon walks free about an hour after his release on the outskirts of the shuttered Graterford prison and its replacement, SCI Phoenix, in Collegeville.

His lawyers instructed him to plead guilty to all the facts, leaving the judge to determine the crimes. Ligon admitted to stabbing one victim who survived. He always contended

that he never killed anyone. Ligon was sentenced to life in prison with little chance of ever getting out.

Since then, all his co-defendants have been released or died.

The United States long led the world in incarcerating juveniles for life without possibility of parole (known as JLWOP), a practice condemned by human rights and civil liberties organisations, questioned by growing research on adolescent brain development and ultimately ruled cruel and unusual punishment, a violation of the Eighth Amendment, in a series of US Supreme Court decisions between 2005 and 2016.

The US state of Pennsylvania long led the country in juvenile lifers, by far, with a quarter of the total. 60 per cent of those prisoners were from Philadelphia, the nation's poorest big city, the overwhelming majority of them black.



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Joe Ligon marvels at the view from his lawyer's eighth-floor window.

It cost the state an estimated US\$3 million (NZ\$4.11m) to lock up Ligon for so long, excluding 37 treatments for prostate cancer. He is now in remission. Correctional departments spend far more incarcerating older prisoners, because of their health needs, even though they're less of a danger to society.

Ligon broke every unenviable record, becoming the nation's oldest, longest-serving juvenile lifer. He is a symbol of this tragic legal legacy. But Ligon's also an old man, grappling with fresh challenges as he re-enters a modern world that he barely knows.

He left prison with 14 cardboard boxes, half of them stuffed with legal papers. They are among his dearest worldly possessions, the paper trail of his protracted confinement, though he cannot read.

He is guilty of robbery and assault, said public defender Bradley Bridge, Ligon's lawyer of 15 years, who has made the release of juvenile lifers a mission, "but he is not guilty of any homicide. He deserved appropriate punishment. But this is particularly disproportionate punishment for someone not guilty of homicide."



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Joe Ligon, right, and his attorney, Bradley Bridge, stop for coronavirus-related temperature checks in the lobby of Bridge's Philadelphia office building.

What was singularly cruel about sentencing a juvenile to life in prison without the possibility of parole, Bridge said, "is it denied them their humanity. It denies them their ability to change, to demonstrate that they can get out of prison and be contributing members of society."

Ligon's case seemed egregious to Bridge, 67. He said, "To be very clear, as I read the transcript, if this went to trial today, Joe Ligon would be found guilty of robbery, aggravated assault or attempted murder, and he would have gotten a sentence of five to 10 years."

In 2016, after the US Supreme Court ruled that all juvenile lifers had to be re-sentenced, Ligon became eligible for parole. Bridge told Ligon he could fight parole from the cell block or the street, and advised the street.

But parole was anathema to Ligon. He wanted to be done with the "long tail" of the law, and refused.

At a sentencing hearing the following spring, the judge told him, "I don't want you to die in prison."

Ligon opted to serve nearly four more years.



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A giddy Joe Ligon shadowboxes in the parking garage to burn off nervous energy as lawyer Bradley Bridge grabs his suitcase from a trunk filled with his client's legal papers.

That first morning after his release, he sat in his lawyer's office - he had come directly from prison, with a stop at a rapid Covid test (negative). "I am a stubborn type of person. I've been that way since I was able to talk," he said.

He didn't want to have to ask for permission to travel to New Jersey to visit his sister and niece. After so many years, he wanted to be free of supervision.

"My case don't call for no parole after being in for so long," Ligon said. "I want to be free the right way, the proper way."

Bridge re-litigated the case, on Ligon's terms, requesting that he be freed without parole. In November, a judge ruled that Ligon could be released within 90 days. Which happened this month.

Ligon's freedom came with its own headaches for both his social workers and his inmate re-entry program.

Housing, health insurance, proper identification and more, everything required to live a legal life outside, necessitated working with more than 10 separate agencies. Ligon was given a wallet, his own television with a sports package (he loves all Philly teams, provided they are winning), and a phone with unlimited minutes.



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Joe Ligon and four other teens went on a violent rampage along a four-block stretch of Philadelphia's Wharton Street in 1953.

His niece Valerie, the daughter of Ligon's ailing sister, plans to be a constant in his life, as he has been in hers. She was there to greet Ligon hours after his release.

"It will not be easy but he is so happy," she said. "This is all new. Our world is so foreign to him." A couple with a two-story West Philadelphia rowhouse, contracted domiciliaries with an agency that cares for older citizens, agreed to take him in.

Ligon's first day was momentous, too, for the many people who have helped him, Team Joe. After the stop at Bridge's office, Bridge drove Ligon to his new home, where his family and support team celebrated on the street and then inside the tidy home.

Among his advocates was John Pace, 52, a former juvenile lifer who knew Ligon for two decades in Graterford prison, earned a bachelor's degree from Villanova and works for the Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project (YSRP).

On the narrow, side street of his new home, Pace met Ligon, who was still wearing his beaten maroon cap from the yard. This was not the attire befitting a free man.

"That was a prison hat. What is Joe doing with that hat on?" asked Pace, incredulous.

Ligon stopped, hurled the cap on the ground, and commenced stomping, an act that would have never been allowed in prison. Team Joe all stomped on the cap. Later, Ligon tossed it in the trash, and donned a new Flyers hat instead, a fresh start.

"That was a crossover moment," Pace said.

"I'm telling you that was maybe the high point of my entire career," said Eleanor Myers, a YRSP senior adviser and law professor emeriti. "Because it was freedom."

All Ligon could do was grin.

His new home is "beautiful. It's clean. I walked in, I could smell the freshness," he said. He was too excited to eat.

"Everything looks different to me. It's all new to me," he said. During the stop at his lawyer's office, Ligon looked out the eight-story window, two blocks from the courtroom where he was convicted in 1953, and claimed to have never before been up this high in any building. "I'm glad I lived long enough to be seeing this."

Ligon describes himself as a loner, and fellow inmates describe "Mr Joe" as quiet, someone who kept to himself. He worked as a custodian in prison. Cleaning is his thing. He loves pushing a broom - that, and maintaining good habits.

But Ligon luxuriates in attention and sharing his story. When I first met him for a column in 2010, Ligon talked uninterrupted for five hours. Unbidden, he will speak at length of the night that ended his old life, as though he's still mounting a defence.

He asked that he not be relocated to his old South Philadelphia neighbourhood, a half mile from where he was sitting, and since gentrified. He wants nothing to do with the place.

"The night I got in trouble was in South Philadelphia. My baby brother was murdered in South Philadelphia. My father was murdered in South Philadelphia," he said. "Nothing but murder, murder, murder."

On his second day of his new life, Ligon went shopping for a down coat, some new pants and undergarments. The stores had become so big, so bright. After 36 hours of no food, Pace finally got Ligon to eat in his car: Popeye's chicken, mashed potatoes and coleslaw.

Ligon outlived many of the prisons that housed him. Graterford, his longest home, closed in 2018. In his youth, he was a boxer in the vaunted program at Holmesburg, which was decommissioned in 1995, Bernard Hopkins its most famed pugilist alum.

Ligon was at one point held for evaluation in Eastern State Penitentiary, which opened in 1829 and once held Al Capone and Willie Sutton. Shuttered in 1971, it is now a historic site and home to the annual Halloween attraction, "Terror Behind the Walls."

Ligon has no intention of visiting, and declined to take part in an exhibit. He said, "that don't suit my taste."

School was never a vital part of his life. He rarely went to class in Troy, Ala, where he picked cotton and tobacco, preferring to spend time with his parents, a self-professed mama's boy.

When he was 13, the family moved north to South Philadelphia. His father found work as a mechanic; his mother, as a nurse's aide. He floundered in school. In prison, he took no classes to advance his rudimentary reading or writing. He asked fellow inmates to type or write letters for him, and to read the ones he received.

Now, Ligon hopes to work, preferably cleaning one of the offices of the people who assisted in his release. Pace plans to get him a membership at a local gym. When the weather improves, Ligon wants to visit local parks. He looks forward to restaurants where he is free to select "good food from a menu." He dreams of choices.

"There are going to be a lot of ladies who are going to like me," he said. "I like good clothes that fit me. I like to smell good. I'm going to make it my business to do that. I'm going to respect women."

He is even willing to return to prison and speak with juvenile lifers still inside.

"We've been to hell and back," he said. "But I like my chances in terms of survival."

In West Philadelphia, Ligon stopped with Pace in front of a mural created by inmates at Graterford. Mark Cumberbatch, a prison sargent, recognised Ligon and came over to welcome him to the neighbourhood. "He was always quiet, a good guy," Cumberbatch said.

That's what Ligon has become, prison-famous. Bridge's daughter is making a documentary about his life. CNN, PBS and German television have called.

His first night out, Ligon didn't sleep any better than his last night in, even without the sirens and glaring lights that, for decades, woke him at 6 am.

"That's an adjustment. You have to get used to governing your own life. Your life's been controlled for so long," said Pace, sitting with Ligon in a back pew of Bible Way Baptist Church, his place of worship, which he hopes Ligon will attend. "This is going to take some time to learn exactly what he wants to do."

Ligon agreed. He needed time to adjust to freedom and a less regulated existence.

"For so long, you live a certain way," he said. "You get immune to change. Your system gets immune to it. No better way than I can describe it than that." The goal, he said, is "to live as normal a life as I possibly can."

One of his first requests was an alarm clock, which Bridge bought for him at CVS the morning of his release. Ligon was looking forward to the morning, not too far from now, when he would need help waking from a solid night of sleep and his schedule was, finally, all his own.