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CRIME

Fast cars and church every Sunday: Exonerated Tennessee woman on not answering to anyone anymore



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Joyce Watkins walks for miles most days.

When she wants to go see her sister in Madison, she grabs her keys and her purse, and she's gone.

She drives herself to Georgia to visit the family plots and lay flowers on her parents' graves. She doesn't have to answer to anyone.

Her freedom was a long time coming.

"A lot of people said I should be angry," Watkins said in a recent interview with The Tennessean. "But I'm not angry. God don't want me to be angry...."

"It would give me blood pressure or heart attacks. You just move on. It's just one of those things."

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Watkins spent nearly three decades in prison after she was wrongfully convicted in 1986 in the rape and murder of a young girl, a beloved relative of hers.

In January, after dogged work by the Tennessee Innocence Project, Watkins and her former boyfriend Charlie Dunn were exonerated, cleared of all charges and declared innocent. Dunn, who died in prison of cancer soon after he learned he was going to be released on parole, never got to see his name cleared.

Watkins was released from prison in October 2015, and she moved to rural Franklin County. Instead of 5 a.m. wake-up calls and the routine of prison, she sleeps in as late as she likes. Her closest neighbors are cows. That's the way she likes it.

But even so many years later, she can't break the habit of going to bed at 9 p.m. The full freedom of exoneration has taken time to settle.

No longer is she on the sex offender registry and barred from public parks. No longer must she call her parole officer every time she wants to go to Tullahoma for church.

Watkins goes to church often. She made a lot of those calls.

'This charge against you is dismissed'

The new investigation by the Tennessee Innocence Project along with a report on the case from the district attorney's conviction review unit brought the case back to court.

Brandy Brooks, Watkins' great-niece, was 4 years old when she died. Investigators at the time believed she was brutally raped and beaten around the head.

Dunn and Watkins were given life sentences on charges of first-degree murder and aggravated rape.

But investigators now question whether the original case proved a sexual assault took place.

Shoddy investigative work, unreliable medical evidence from now-disgraced pathologists and hints of racism from then-prosecutors toward the Black defendants litter the old files.

Davidson County Criminal Court Judge Angelita Blackshear Dalton was unequivocal in her ruling the pair is innocent. She paused the formal proceedings to look Watkins in the eye.

"Miss Watkins — I'm going to take my mask off to tell you this. Miss Watkins, this charge against you is dismissed," Dalton said in January. "And to the family of Charlie Dunn, the charge against Charlie Dunn is dismissed."

Neither Watkins nor Dunn had a criminal record, and they both held steady jobs. They were building a family.

Watkins wanted a child of her own. She was close to adopting, maybe only a month away, when Brandy died.

Watkins' family members, including Brandy's mother, repeatedly spoke on Watkins' behalf over the years and insisted on her innocence. Dunn's sons visited him often, and his siblings helped sell family items to pay for an attorney because they were sure of his innocence.

"If I had gotten out sooner, I was buying a house," Watkins said. "I was working, looking for a car. I wanted nice savings, nice clothes. I would have got out and started back working again to maintain what I lost.

"But by it taking so long, you wonder if it's worth trying to do."

Looking forward

Watkins is 74. Between prison and parole, she spent half her life constrained.

She missed the funerals of almost all her siblings. She missed births, christenings and graduations. She missed family reunions and the road trips they took all over the country together.

"I was taken out of all of life," she said.

The last funeral she attended before her arrest was Brandy's. Only this year was she able to return to the cemetery to place flowers on her grave.

"I have to accept that she's gone, but it doesn't stop me thinking about her," Watkins said.

She said little else about her great-niece.

She is frank, even when emotion leads her to speak quietly or choose her words carefully. She likes hanging out with her nephews — who these days range in age from 40 to 60 — because she likes the fast cars they drive and the way she can let loose with them.

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They haven't convinced her to go dancing, yet.

Family and faith are everything to Watkins. She crochets with incredible skill. The Tennessee Innocence Project office sports enormous, delicate lace blankets worked by Watkins' hands. A tiny crocheted swan has pride of place on the reception desk.

She once crocheted a table cloth with the Lord's Prayer in its center and another with the names of all her siblings who died before she could see them again.

Crocheting was one of the things that kept her steady in prison, she said. It forced her to look forward, not back.

"I had been praying for God to, you know, put somebody in my life to help me," she said. "You just hope and pray that someday you can prove that you didn't do it."

She attributes her exoneration to the Tennessee Innocence Project, especially her lead attorney Jason Gichner. The pair are clearly fond of each other, reminiscing over a trip to a conference for exonerees.

"He's going to be in my life forever," she said.

Never giving up

Dunn's family only learned last year that Watkins was offered a deal before trial. If she said Dunn committed the crime, Watkins would get a lighter sentence.

But she didn't agree to it.

"He was innocent," she said in court in December.

For Nathaniel Dunn, hearing his father's innocence in court brought a wave of relief, he told The Tennessean.

He never believed his dad was guilty, he said. For years, he would go down to the prison and play dominoes and checkers, and just sit and talk with his father.

"I wish he was here. I wish he was here so he could tell the world himself," he said. "It hurts."

Dunn, 52, struggles with the weight of being a voice for his father. He thinks of him every day, especially when parenting his own sons: Chase, 28, and Kehym, 4.

But his whole mood changes when he mentions Watkins.

"It's wonderful," he repeats. "It's wonderful."

He and Watkins talk almost every other day, he said.

She had been his stepmother in all but name, he said. He loved her. The pair lost touch after the arrests and it wasn't until recently that they reconnected, after Watkins tracked him down.

"We were a package deal," he said of himself and his brother. "She treated us like we were one of hers."

He feels connected to his father through speaking with her. And he's thankful to her, for never giving up seeking justice for herself and for his dad.

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