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BLINDED BY THE LIGHT Freedom Clasps Its Own Shackles on Ex-Prisoner Ellen Reasonover

By Athelia Knight
Washington Post Staff Writer

ST. LOUIS --

On her 13th day of freedom, Ellen Reasonover is lounging in her pink pajamas and robe and smoking a cigarette when her daughter, Charmelle Bufford, walks into the beige-carpeted living room.

"Mom, I'll be right back," she says, buttoning her denim dress. "I got to go pick up my friend. He's stranded."

Reasonover beckons her over, putting out the cigarette in an ashtray on the floor. As her daughter stands in front of her, Reasonover tugs with both hands at the bottom of the dress, which falls just a few inches above the knee. "Don't you have a dress longer than this?" she asks.

It's the second time today they've discussed her clothing, Charmelle reminds her, slightly annoyed. She's already taken off the cutoff jeans her mother complained were too short.

"I give you a hand for that. Thank you, Jesus," says Reasonover. "I love you, Charmelle," she says, then hugs her.

"I love you, too," Charmelle tells her and then runs out the door.

Reasonover, 41, gazes out the front window of her mother's apartment to watch Charmelle, 18, drive away in the red 1999 Mustang that Reasonover has rented for the week. "She only got her license three weeks ago," she says. "I hope she's careful."

Hemlines and driving habits--the stuff of an everyday encounter between a mother and her teenage daughter. But for Ellen Reasonover, all this seems new, difficult and a bit frightening.

Reasonover spent the last 16 1/2 years in prison for a murder that she maintains she did not commit. On Aug. 2, after a hearing on new evidence in the case, U.S. District Judge Jean C. Hamilton overturned her 1983 conviction and ordered her release, ruling that the prosecutor withheld evidence from Reasonover's attorneys that could have proved her innocence at trial.

A day after the ruling, Reasonover walked out of the Chillicothe Correctional Center in Missouri

and found herself in the local and national media spotlight. But the spotlight quickly faded. Now that the homecoming celebrations are over and the media attention has diminished, Reasonover is ready to get on with her life. She wants a job, so she can get a place of her own to live and take care of Charmelle and her mother, Elizabeth.

And she wants to find a way back into her family's life.

On Pins and Needles

Charmelle was 2 years old when Reasonover was arrested in January 1983. Now she is a teenager struggling to define her boundaries, just as her mother is exploring her own.

Having measured her daughter's life in months between prison visits, Reasonover is eager to build a relationship. "I really don't know her," she says. "Every time I saw her, sometimes she was a year older or sometimes she was eight months older or six months older."

The two share a strong resemblance. Both are attractive, fair-complexioned with smooth skin. Charmelle is a little shorter than her mother, who is 5 feet 8. Each has long black hair. Reasonover wears hers pulled back into a ponytail; Charmelle's is cut short on the sides above her ears and long in the back. Charmelle has gold caps on two of her front teeth.

As Reasonover relaxes at her mother's apartment one day in mid-August, Charmelle pops in and out, seemingly delighted to have her mother home but also pleased to have a car to drive. She's polite, saying "excuse me" when interrupting and answering "yes, ma'am" and "no, ma'am" to her mother.

Each time she asks to use the car, which is most of the day, she tells Reasonover where she is going. "Try to come home early so Mommy can see you," Reasonover tells her as she leaves for one errand. "I haven't seen you at all. You keep going."

"All right. Stuff keeps coming up," she says, giving her mother a hug.

Their private moments have been few since Reasonover's release from prison, and not always so warm and polite. Mother and daughter cried and hugged when reunited the day after she was freed, but it was a brief meeting that took place before television cameras and reporters outside a relative's home. Then Reasonover was whisked off to various interviews and a trip out of town. According to Reasonover, during a homecoming party with her supporters a week later, Charmelle "got to going crazy, saying, 'I'm tired of these people getting on my nerves.'"

Reasonover summoned her into a bathroom to talk, and Charmelle used "language" that her mother did not want to hear. Charmelle "said she didn't care about mother-[expletive] Centurion Ministries," the group that had worked to get Reasonover released from prison. "These people are responsible for my freedom," she says she told Charmelle, who kept shouting profanity.

Reasonover reacted the only way she knew how, the way she had learned to survive in prison

when others disrespected her.

"I smacked her, knocked her up against the bathroom wall," she says. "She started cussing me out. I smacked her again."

Relatives heard the commotion, came into the bathroom and pulled Reasonover away from Charmelle. Once the two were separated, Charmelle kept cursing at Reasonover, and the two had to be pulled apart a second time.

Outbursts, Reasonover had recently learned, were common with Charmelle. "All of the stuff she was doing to my mother, [showing] disrespect to my sisters and brothers" had to end, Reasonover says she told her. "It's over now. I'm here, and you're going to respect me."

They made up after a devastated Reasonover apologized. She also gave Charmelle money, \$150 of the \$200 that friends and supporters had inserted in cards pressed into Reasonover's hand during the homecoming celebration. She also gave her a cellular phone and let her use the red Mustang.

Keeping the peace hasn't been easy.

One night, after Charmelle stays out late again, Reasonover takes the car keys and grounds her. Charmelle starts crying, sits next to her grandmother on the couch and puts her head on her lap. Reasonover is sitting across from them on another couch. But the conflict isn't over. The two fight over the car again later that night.

"She beat me," Reasonover says the morning after, rolling down her white sock to reveal a bruise on her left leg. "I don't think I can ever forgive her," she says, tears flowing down her face.

Charmelle and Reasonover stop speaking. A couple of times, Charmelle stands in the hallway and glares at her mother, who is seated in the living room. During one phone conversation, she says loudly that she and her mother "got into it. . . . She can't come in here telling me what to do."

Reasonover's older sister Hilda Jones is worried about the tension between the two. "Everybody agrees that the two of you have to be separated," Jones says, and persuades her sister to move in with her and her husband.

"They both need help," Jones says. "Ellen does not know how to be a mother. And Charmelle won't listen to anybody."

For years, Jones says, she and her mother believed that Charmelle needed counseling, but they couldn't afford it. As a child, Charmelle was "hyper" and had to be put on medication. But Reasonover didn't think her daughter needed medicine and told her mother to stop giving it to her.

Whenever they tried to discipline or scold Charmelle, Jones says, Charmelle told them that they were treating her that way because she didn't have a mother. When Charmelle was young and being cared for by a grandmother who was much older than the parents of her classmates, she told her friends that her mother was away in college. They later learned the truth from the "Free Ellen Reasonover" campaign; Charmelle herself was sometimes brought into radio studios to support her mother.

"People can be cruel," Jones says. "They would tease her and say her mother is in jail. She had to explain that her mother was in jail but she didn't do it. People go, 'Right.' "

As the discipline problems grew worse, the family decided to keep them from Reasonover, arguing that she had enough to deal with in prison. And they wanted the two to have a pleasant visit since they were together only about twice a year.

"It's a horrible situation," Jones says. "Everyone is on pins and needles. We're happy and elated that Ellen is home. . . . She really loves Charmelle and wants to have a relationship with her, but she doesn't know how."

She pauses. "When these types of things happen, it's not all peaches and cream," she says. "When you take someone away for 16, 17 years, it affects the whole family."

Fundamentally Unfair?

Just how Reasonover ended up sentenced to 50 years in prison without parole is a journey that began with a phone call. She voluntarily contacted police as a potential witness in the early morning murder of a gas station attendant and later was charged with and convicted of that murder.

The Washington Post, after conducting a six-week investigation, published a two-part series in June 1984 that uncovered new evidence in Reasonover's case and raised serious questions about critical testimony from two inmates, Rose Jolliff and Mary Ellen Lyner, who said Reasonover had confessed to the murder. Both prisoners had long criminal records and histories of drug addiction, and benefited from their testimony--a fact that prosecutors did not tell the jury.

In addition, five other women, including three who were in small cells with Reasonover when she allegedly made her confessions, told The Post that they never heard Reasonover say anything incriminating, and she repeatedly proclaimed her innocence. None of the five was interviewed by defense lawyers or asked to testify at Reasonover's trial.

It all began Jan. 2, 1983, sometime between 1:45 and 2 a.m. when James Buckley, 19, was beaten and shot seven times in the back room of a Vickers gas station in the St. Louis suburb of Dellwood. Police theorized robbery was a motive.

Reasonover heard the news reports of the murder and told her mother about two men she had seen at the station when she went there to get change for the laundry. Her mother urged her to

call police. She did, but gave a fictitious name.

When Reasonover later met with the police, she explained that she had used the false name because she feared being hurt by whomever committed the murder. She picked out two men from a mug shot book who she said looked like the men she had seen at the station. A second witness also picked out one of the same men as resembling a man he had seen that night.

Police found the two men Reasonover had identified--in the city workhouse. They had been in custody at the time of the murder. After viewing more mug shots, Reasonover picked out a third man. But he had a firm alibi as well.

By now, the detective was suspicious of Reasonover, who had positively identified three men who had nothing to do with the murder. And she'd passed a polygraph test confirming that she was at the Vickers station that night.

Reasonover also had described a getaway car that made the police more suspicious. It was similar to a car that Reasonover's ex-boyfriend Stanley White had been in when the two had had an argument a week earlier.

Police began to check Reasonover's background. She had worked at a Vickers station in 1978. One night, the station manager accused Reasonover and another boyfriend of robbing the station. Both insisted they were falsely accused by the manager because of an earlier argument between him and the boyfriend. No charges were filed, and the case was dropped.

Three days after she first came forth, Reasonover was arrested for murder. Then her story began to change, she failed a polygraph test, and the two inmates, Jolliff and Lyner, told police she had confessed to them.

Throughout her long years in prison, Reasonover continued to insist that she was innocent. She wrote letters to anyone she thought could help her, including Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton and their wives as well as Pope John Paul II, Jesse Jackson, Oprah Winfrey and Nelson Mandela.

In 1986, she wrote to Centurion Ministries, a Princeton, N.J., group that worked to free inmates wrongly convicted and sentenced to death or life in prison. In 1993, after Reasonover had exhausted her appeals at the state court level, Jim McCloskey, founder of Centurion Ministries, began looking into her case.

A few years later, McCloskey and an investigator discovered a recording police had made of a conversation between Reasonover and White when they were put in adjacent cells in 1983. Both maintained their innocence.

At an evidence hearing last June in U.S. District Court in St. Louis, Reasonover's defense team argued that the tape between Reasonover and her ex-boyfriend challenged the testimony of Lyner and Jolliff. A second tape, secretly recorded by the police in 1983, was discovered in

which Reasonover repeatedly told Jolliff she was innocent. Jolliff refused to testify at the hearing, invoking her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. Lyner died in 1990, a suicide.

In ordering Reasonover released, Judge Hamilton wrote that "had the tape [between Jolliff and Reasonover] been disclosed . . . it would have . . . had a devastating impact on Jolliff's credibility at trial.

"The prosecution's failure to turn over evidence favorable to the defense rendered [Reasonover's] trial fundamentally unfair and deprived [her] of rights under the due process clause."

Back to Earth

A day later, Ellen Reasonover walked out of prison in Chillicothe, about a five-hour drive from St. Louis, and into a whirlwind.

There was a news conference in Kansas City, Mo., where she spent her first night after she was released. The next day, she and her attorneys drove to St. Louis for more interviews. During the frenzy, Reasonover had only about an hour with her family before she had to fly to New York for an appearance on the "Today" show. Less than 48 hours after her release, she sat with her three lawyers and was interviewed by Katie Couric. Afterward, she had more interviews with her lawyers on MSNBC and CNN.

Reasonover made two personal requests: a purse and a fishing trip.

She had not been allowed to have a purse in prison, so her lawyers took her shopping in New York. She chose a small black handbag with a gold chain by designer Paloma Picasso, and a friend of one of her lawyers paid more than \$100 for it. It was the cheapest purse she could find in the store, Reasonover says.

For two days, Reasonover stayed at the Essex House and rode in a chauffeur-driven limousine. Then the limo driver took her from New York to Princeton, home base of Centurion Ministries. From there, a staffer and her husband drove Reasonover to Delaware for a weekend of fishing, her favorite pastime before she went to prison.

"I needed the time to get my thoughts together," she says. "It was really relaxing."

Six days after her release, Reasonover pauses to take it all in, sitting on a park bench across from the tree-lined campus of Princeton University down the street from Centurion Ministries. "I'm free, I'm free," she says, repeatedly as if to convince herself that she really is. "I don't have to deal with those crazy people no more."

She says she holds no bitterness toward the prosecutor and the lead detective in her case. "I seen a lot of girls come in [to prison] bitter and angry," she says. "And that changed them. I never wanted to be like that. . . . I have never been the type of person to hold grudges against people."

Reasonover is the 20th lifer or death row inmate McCloskey's group has helped to free.

Based on his experience, McCloskey tells Reasonover, she should consider counseling sessions to help her adjust to her new life with Charmelle and her family and to being out of prison after so many years.

"I'm not crazy," Reasonover insists.

"That's not what it's about at all," McCloskey says, sitting behind his desk, with pictures of other freed inmates on the walls.

"What if I don't like their opinion?" Reasonover asks.

"Well . . . the truth hurts sometimes," McCloskey says. "If you like the person and if you trust them and respect them, and then if they give you some insight into yourself that you don't like, then I think you will be able to accept it more [from a professional] than from somebody you have feelings for."

" 'Cause the last 16 years of my life," Reasonover says, stopping in mid-sentence. She is uncomfortable, fidgeting in the chair and holding her head down.

"At least give it a chance," he says. "It could make you stronger."

Most inmates do not want to talk to prison psychologists, she says, because they don't respect them. "I had a cold and stuff, and the clinic referred [me] to the psych."

Eventually, Reasonover agrees to consider counseling because of McCloskey's persistence.

"She went from the depths of Hell to pure Heaven within three days," McCloskey says. "It's overwhelming for her to step out of one world and into another. And what's really going to happen, the reality of all this, is she was in Hell for 17 years. She is in Heaven right now. But she is going to have to come down and settle on Earth. And that's going to be a very difficult process."

Blending In

But counseling is not Reasonover's major concern. She is too busy fielding requests for interviews and appearances at local and national events. The telephone in her mother's apartment rings constantly during the two days a reporter visits her there.

She learns to screen her calls because many of them are from people she does not know--distant relatives and supporters, prisoners who claim they are innocent and ask for her help. In the middle of a conversation with a woman who called to invite her to appear on Montel Williams's show, Reasonover interrupts to click on call-waiting.

"Hi, Yolanda," she says. "I don't mean nothing, but can you call me back? I got Montel Williams on the other line."

Between phone calls, Reasonover talks about how she needs to find a job, but she doesn't know how to go about it. She says she wants to work at the telephone company or for Anheuser-Busch, somewhere where she can "make more than the minimum wage."

Her employment history is limited. She was on welfare when she was arrested in 1983 and had never held a job longer than six months. She had dropped out of high school in the 11th grade and earned her GED diploma at a community college.

In prison, she worked the night shift cleaning floors. She earned \$7.50 a month during most of her time there. She took typing and basic computer classes while in prison and she studied cosmetology, but because she was a lifer, she said, she was not allowed to pursue a license in cosmetology.

She received a check for \$866.66, her "inmate account fund," at her mother's apartment in mid-August. She didn't quite know what to do with the check and hadn't handled money since she was imprisoned. Asking her mother or sister to cash it seemed her only option until McCloskey suggested she open her own checking account.

Her driver's license had expired in 1984, so she got a state ID and opened her first-ever bank account. Her supporters, who collected donations on her behalf, gave her more than \$4,500 to deposit in her account. It's now up to about \$7,000, fueled in part by frequent appearances with her supporters.

In recent weeks, she's been to New York for a fund-raiser for Centurion Ministries, where she met famed lawyer Johnnie Cochran.

She also attended a three-day conference in Memphis for death penalty opponents. One of her lawyers who specializes in capital murder cases asked her to go with him. "He helped with my case," she says. "I couldn't tell him no."

She hopes things slow down soon so she can focus on her immediate needs. She wants to get her driver's license. She wants to buy a car so she can take Charmelle to school. "It's hard adjusting to life," she says.

The two are getting along better since they began living in separate homes, with Reasonover staying with her sister and Charmelle with her grandmother. But Reasonover is more involved in her daughter's life; for example, going to her high school to check on her progress toward graduation in June. And she bought Charmelle a new dress to wear when both taped an appearance on "The Montel Williams Show."

Reasonover is eager to "blend in"--to fit seamlessly into what she used to think of as the outside

world. When she was fishing in Delaware, she bought a cigarette lighter but couldn't figure out how to use it. So she asked the cashier to show her.

"I'm from another country," she told him.

"Which one?" he asked.

She thought for a moment. "Ethiopia."

"That's in Africa," he said.

"Probably," she said and walked out.

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