

A SECOND CHANCE AFTER 20 YEARS IN PRISON, JEDONNA YOUNG TRIES TO START A NEW LIFE

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Getting up in the stillness of daybreak, throwing on a coat over jeans, driving along sleepy city streets to the parole office so she can be first in line to go to the bathroom in a plastic cup.

These are the mornings when **JeDonna Young** is a prisoner again.

She signs in at the front desk -- the only place she uses her prisoner identification number anymore -- and waits with the others. She is polite but not friendly. She keeps to herself, just like she did in prison.

Which is how she survived all those years in that place, its air thick with anger and the smell of cigarettes and burnt popcorn. She ate alone in her cell. She wore headphones, although they never provided complete shelter. Too many times, she heard women wailing and crying about bad news -- a death in the family, a kid in trouble, things she didn't want to know.

I'm a lifer, **JeDonna** would say to herself. Nobody sees me cry. Not in bad times. Not in good times. Her armor didn't even crack when the Michigan Legislature amended the drug law that sent her away to die in prison. The change made her eligible for parole.

And suddenly she was free. The first person paroled after being convicted of possession with intent to deliver 650 grams or more of heroin or cocaine -- which she says wasn't hers. Yet **JeDonna** didn't whoop or carry on. She told one person -- a prisoner who worked in the kitchen and sometimes slipped her extra fruit.

And now, one morning a month, **JeDonna** reports to the parole office for a drug test.

In the lobby, she listens as the others talk about being ready to party and how their lawyers have done them wrong and she worries ...

What's going to happen if one of these people gets busted on a parole violation? What if there's a fight? I could be caught in the middle. I don't want any trouble. I just want to be left alone. I just want to get on with my life.

The parole officer calls her name, and **JeDonna** is relieved.

She'll be on her way soon. It's just a 10-minute drive back to her mother's house -- a cozy bungalow on a quiet street in northwest Detroit.

She'll slip inside and lock the door and stay there the rest of the day -- vacuuming, scrubbing, dusting floors and furnishings that are already clean.

She is 45, and after spending almost half her life in prison, the whole world is open to her.

And right now, it scares her.

WHEN SHE WENT to prison in 1979, one of the first to be convicted on the drug lifer law, **JeDonna Young** lost everything -- her son, her mother, her job, her privacy, her independence.

Then, in January 1999, she became the first person serving life without parole for drug crimes to be paroled. Currently 143 prisoners are serving similar sentences. Stay out of trouble, see your parole officer once a month for the next four years, and you're free to live your life.

How would **JeDonna** make up for all she had lost? All the missed birthdays and funerals and holidays? The nights she wasn't able to help her mother clean up the kitchen after a family meal or tuck her son into bed? The things left unsaid? The loneliness?

How long would it be before she fit in?

Before she could face the wide-open world without fear?

Her first year of freedom would be full of challenges. If she could make it through, everything else would be easy.

She just needed to decide where to start.

EVEN IF SHE WANTED, **JeDonna** couldn't go back to her old life -- single mom, beauty school graduate, community college student, cashier in a store on the stretch of Livernois in Detroit called Avenue of Fashion. That life vanished the day police found almost 3 pounds of heroin in her car.

JeDonna hadn't always made the smartest choices -- she'd had a baby in high school; she'd been unable to settle on a career; and once again, she'd gotten involved with an older man who turned out to be trouble.

The drugs aren't mine, she said. My boyfriend asked me to put a bag in the car and give him a ride. I didn't know what was inside the bag. I've never been in trouble with the law.

You're guilty, the judge said. At that time in Michigan, being convicted of possession with intent to deliver more than 650 grams (about 1 1/2 pounds) of heroin or cocaine meant life in prison. No parole. No exceptions.

At first, **JeDonna** 's mother, Irene Hardy, hid the envelopes containing **JeDonna** 's letters. She didn't want **JeDonna** 's 8-year-old son to see the return address and know his mother wasn't coming home. She's away at college, Irene said. Eventually, she had to tell the truth. Deloneo **Young** was Grandma's baby now.

Del visited **JeDonna** in prison. He ate Cheetos and Nestle Crunch bars from vending machines like the rest of the inmates' kids. Sometimes, Irene brought food -- pizza, Taco Bell, homemade fish dinners and ice cream -- and the family picnicked in the prison courtyard. Del enjoyed those meals -- everybody together, talking over good food. I'm going to say good-bye and not look back, he told himself at the end every trip. Except he always looked back, and the view through the prison's double doors was always the same -- **JeDonna** standing alone, watching as her family left.

Del never cried in front of his mother. He didn't want to make her sad.

He didn't cry in front of his grandmother, either. How could he? Irene Hardy was so strong. "I'm still alive and where there's life, there's hope," she always said.

After high school, Del stopped visiting his mother; he said he couldn't stand leaving her behind anymore.

JeDonna fussed about Del over the phone. She asked about his grades. One year -- whether he was 11 or 12, **JeDonna** can't recall -- she and some of the other prisoners sang him "Happy Birthday."

The women put aside their differences when their kids were concerned. **JeDonna** often didn't bother learning the names of her bunkies -- though they slept right below her for six weeks or two months or however long it took until they were processed into the system and assigned permanent roommates. But she befriended women she knew missed their children, and she worked on a prison committee to allow children more access to their mothers.

The rest of the time, the women argued about who got first use of the microwave. Or they fought over the iron. Or the telephone. **JeDonna** fought, too. She was angry, after all; she didn't think she belonged in prison.

As the years wore on, **JeDonna** softened. I'm going to take something away from this, she said.

She earned a bachelor's degree -- becoming one of the first female prisoners in the state to do so. She became a paralegal, helping prisoners with their appeals, and made spending money working in the prisoners' legal services office.

She stopped hating her ex-boyfriend, who was convicted with her and sentenced to life without parole; he died in prison in 1997. She said she had no feelings -- bad or good -- toward him. Still, she refused to utter his name; when she spoke of him, she always called him "my co-defendant."

JeDonna heard others say she was aloof; that she was just setting herself up for disappointment with her constant appeals. She'll never get out, they said.

And what did **JeDonna** say? Nothing. All those years had made her numb to bad words and gossip. She simply went about her routine. Coffee and meals -- oatmeal, instant potatoes -- in her 8-by 9-foot cell because she didn't like the food or the commotion in the cafeteria. Work. Bible time. Sleep.

It was the only life **JeDonna** knew for 20 years.

And then that was gone, too.

ON JAN. 29, 1999, **JeDonna** stood in a parking lot across the street from Scott Correctional Facility in Plymouth and put up with questions from the horde of reporters intent on documenting her release. Even "60 Minutes" was there.

If she'd had her way, **JeDonna** wouldn't have talked to anyone -- she just wanted to go home. But the reporters wanted a story. The law that sent her to prison had been a controversial one. Human-rights agencies, activists, family members of convicts, even the governor who signed the law said it was too harsh. Did you ever think this day would come? the reporters wanted to know.

JeDonna, overwhelmed, said she'd never given up hope she would get out. She thanked God for her freedom. She said those who worked on her behalf were instruments of God. She said she wasn't angry or bitter. All she could do, she said, was put all those years behind her and move forward with the rest of her life.

Then she went home to her mother.

The street looked different from what **JeDonna** remembered. Several hours later, she realized it was the trees that had changed. They were saplings when she'd gone away, but now they were grown, their leafless branches stretching high into the gray winter sky.

In the living room, **JeDonna** hugged her 71-year-old mother. It was the first time in 20 years that they shared an embrace without **JeDonna** having to be patted down by prison officials afterward.

"She's my daughter. I love her and that's it," Irene said.

Del arrived two days later, when "60 Minutes" flew him from his home in Kalamazoo for an interview.

Slowly, **JeDonna** settled in.

She soaked in her mother's bathtub. "Wash the prison off of you," one of the activists who worked for **JeDonna**'s release said when she gave her a gift that included bath gel.

JeDonna delighted in the abundance of fresh melon her mother kept in the house. She loved that she got to drink her juice from a real glass instead of a cardboard box. She talked for weeks about the salad her stepbrother's wife served her, because it had four kinds of lettuce.

JeDonna turned her mother's first-floor den into a bedroom, arranging her new assortment of lotions in a basket on the floor. She stowed her bras and panties in the footlocker she'd used in prison. There was drawer space in an upstairs bedroom, but **JeDonna** was more comfortable keeping all her belongings in her room. The paralegal work she did part time for Michigan Families Against Mandatory Minimums, the agency that worked for her parole. Her own legal files. Everything in that one little room. She told her mother not to clean it. She snapped at her son when he poked around. You don't need to be touching my stuff, she said.

JeDonna dried some congratulatory flowers she received and stuck them in a vase near the front door. She put other dried flowers in a vase on the living room coffee table. She kept contact lens solution in the bathroom and some makeup in a drawer. But aside from those things, there was little evidence of her presence outside her bedroom.

At night, lying on the floor because the mattress on her mother's sofa bed was too soft, **JeDonna** cried quietly. "I'm finally home," she said. "Thank you God for letting me be here."

In the mornings, she made breakfast for her mother. Afterward, **JeDonna** went to her room and drank her coffee alone.

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, **JeDonna** kept track of exactly how many days she'd been free.

It's 31 days, she would say. It's been 53 days. I've been home exactly four weeks and three days.

She seldom left her mother's house, occupying her time sorting through boxes of old clothes and cleaning. It was easier to stay inside the locked bungalow. She knew what to expect there -- her mother's fried fish and German chocolate cake and collect calls from her son, who once wanted to be an attorney so he could get her out of prison but runs a diner in Kalamazoo.

Outside, **JeDonna** worried she might be chased by stray dogs. Or that she might get lost. Or that she might make another dumb mistake -- like the time she went to the drug store and walked away to look at something without realizing she'd left her cash on the counter. Like all inmates, **JeDonna** kept money in a prison account. When she bought items from the commissary, the prison debited her account. She hadn't handled bills or change in 20 years. She sensed people knew she was unsure of her surroundings. She worried someone would take advantage of her.

And yet, she knew she couldn't squander her second chance.

She applied to the University of Michigan for admission to a graduate degree in social work.

She wanted to help others; she wanted a good job -- one that would allow her to pay some of her mother's bills, to buy her nice gifts, to take her on vacation. **JeDonna** liked the idea of a vacation. She remembered a woman in prison telling her about a place in northern Michigan where people can pick their own cherries. Nothing sounded more wonderful.

It would be months before she felt comfortable enough to take a road trip, though. After practicing with a friend, **JeDonna** had regained her driver's license, which lapsed while she was in prison. She drove alone for the first time at the end of May -- a spur-of-the-moment trip to the home of a family friend who promised to hem a skirt for her. She passed the house and had to pull into a driveway to turn around, but -- seat belt fastened, doors locked, windows rolled up -- she made it there and back safely.

In September, **JeDonna** started her graduate classes. She drove to Ann Arbor twice a week, arriving 45 minutes early for her first day of school. She seldom mingled with the other students. I'm not here to socialize, she said, I'm here to take care of business. In December, she paused as she wrote Christmas cards to a couple of women in prison. She couldn't remember the address.

And she couldn't remember how many days she'd been free.

JEDONNA JUST KNEW her first Christmas at her mother's house would be special.

For so many years, she'd been disappointed by the holidays. Sometimes, to relieve the loneliness, the women pinned their children's pictures up on a Christmas bulletin board. For a while, **JeDonna** put up Del's picture. But instead of being comforted by the sight of his face on a wall with all the other children, she only felt sadder and more alone.

After her release, **JeDonna** didn't make spending time with her son a priority. Both said they felt close to each other, but sometimes, **JeDonna** acknowledged, she and Del seemed more like sister and brother than parent and child. She hadn't raised Del; her mother had. She hadn't disciplined him or held him in her lap when he was scared. In prison, she'd been allowed to hug him when he arrived for his visit and when he left.

Del was 28 now. He was the father of two daughters. His oldest lived in California and had spent a couple weeks during the summer with **JeDonna**. His baby, born at the end of November, lived in Kalamazoo. **JeDonna** had never seen her and didn't feel a need to rush across the state to visit. The baby's going to be around for a long time, **JeDonna** reasoned. She knew Del was disappointed she wouldn't help him in his restaurant. I have to do something for me, **JeDonna** said.

"That's the one thing about lost time. I can't make it up. It's gone. I can only apologize for not being there."

Del didn't make an effort to spend time his mother, either, although when he came to town every month or so, he'd point out that she'd been too busy to talk to him.

On Christmas Day, Irene Hardy, a wonderful cook, invited a few family friends for dinner. She prepared cornish hens and a feast of fixings. She and her friends ate together in the dining room.

JeDonna didn't join them.

She caught up on paralegal work in her room.

HAVE YOU HAD any trouble adjusting? the parole supervisor asked.

No, **JeDonna** said, surprised at the question.

With the Jan. 29 anniversary of her first year of freedom nearing, she'd accomplished so much -- she'd relearned to drive, she'd spoken to groups about repealing drug-lifer laws and overcoming prison, she'd completed a semester of graduate school, she'd started an internship working with female prisoners who have children.

She knew the sort of help the women would need. But she didn't tell them that. She sat through interviews with "Court TV" and Dan Rather and yet she never told people she encountered every day where she'd been for 20 years. She didn't tell her classmates. She didn't tell the snide banker who wondered how on earth someone could survive in the world without a driver's license, a state identification card or a checking account. She didn't tell the women she met at a friend's church group. She worried what people would think of her if they found out where she'd been.

Her anniversary was a quiet one.

Her mother spent the day shopping with a friend.

Her son was in Kalamazoo, though he called several times to ask her to drive his half-brother to the train station in Dearborn.

JeDonna was alone.

She ordered carry-out dinner from a Thai restaurant. She'd only recently discovered the hot and spicy flavors and ordered a dish with shrimp, scallops and imitation crab meat.

Alone in her room, she savored every bite.

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Caption: Photo SUSAN TUSA/Detroit Free Press; Photo PAULINE LUBENS/Detroit Free Press
Above: **JeDonnaYoung** , 45, received a life sentence without parole in 1979 for possession of heroin she says wasn't hers. Last year, when the law was changed, she left prison.

Left: **JeDonna** , who lives with her mother, still spends much of her time alone in her room. When state lawmakers changed the drug lifer law, **JeDonnaYoung** went before the parole board at Scott Correctional Facility in Plymouth. In January 1999, the 10 members voted unanimously for her release.

JeDonnaYoung sorts through her aunt's clothing, marveling at the choices offered to her. It was her first weekend out of prison.

Above: **JeDonna** hugs her mom, Irene Hardy, the day of her release, the first time in 20 years they could embrace without **JeDonna** having to be patted down by prison officials afterward.

JeDonna says she's determined to put those years behind her and move forward with her life.

Left: The media were eager to hear what **JeDonna** had to say about being the first person paroled after a change in the law that had sent her to prison for life. She spoke briefly -- thanking God and others who had aided in her appeals -- then went home to her mother in Detroit.

Right: **JeDonnaYoung** was thrilled she passed her driving test to get a license again. Hers had lapsed while she was in prison.

Below: Del **Young** was 8 when his mother went to prison. Now he's 28. Spending time together isn't a priority for either of them. "That's the one thing about lost time," **JeDonna** says. "I can't make it up . . .I can only apologize for not being there."

Above: Determined not to waste her second chance at life, **JeDonna** enrolled in graduate courses at the University of Michigan. On her first day, she was so nervous she arrived 45 minutes before class.

Right: During a field trip for a social work class, **JeDonnaYoung** , left, waslks through a southwest Detroit neighborhood with a classmate and a homeowner.

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