

Prison release is the first surprise of many

Paroled after three decades in prison for capital murder, Michael Eubanks is now reconnecting with a family he barely knew

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Michael Eubanks has been living at the Isaiah House in northeast Houston since his release. He's also found a job.

When Michael Eubanks was convicted of capital murder in 1978 and given a life sentence, his hair was as flaming red as his temper.

The 20-year-old from Houston got into prison fights daily. His first year he was even thrown into solitary confinement for organizing what officials called a mutiny.

After all, he never expected to make it out of prison alive. Nobody cared what happened to him. He didn't know his birth parents and had burned bridges with his adopted ones. He saw his chances for parole as "slim to none."

Yet, after three decades in a 6-foot-by-9-foot cell, he felt he had mellowed like his strawberry-blond hair.

He's now 52. He earned a college degree behind bars and became a master leather craftsman.

Still, since becoming eligible for parole in 1997, Eubanks' application had been rejected five times. In Texas, parole for capital murder is next to impossible. Again he pensively waited this summer to learn his fate. He didn't feel anything like the person who made prison his home, never expecting to rejoin society.

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Eubanks always knew he was adopted at 6 months, but he never knew why. His mother, Faye, would only say, "You don't need to know."

So he pushed his questions aside while growing up with three brothers in Lubbock.

His father, a machinist, was a good provider. They lived on tree-lined streets in nice brick homes.

Yet the family moved around like tumbleweeds in Lubbock, forcing Eubanks to adjust to six different schools.

At that time, he was more mischievous than his brothers, but he never slipped into serious trouble — until his 15th birthday when his family relocated to Denver and then Houston.

In Houston, Eubanks once again attended multiple schools. He felt detached from his classes and dropped out in 10th grade.

"I was real rebellious," he said. "Whenever I argued with my parents about hair length or smoking, my answer was to leave. I was a teenager with a motorcycle and wanted freedom. I lived for the moment."

Eventually, he began hanging out with bikers such as the Highway Demons or Conquistadors. His experimentation with drugs grew to include heroin.

Soon he was stealing from his parents, robbing small stores and running drugs coast to coast.

At one point before the murder, he almost jumped off his train ride to self-destruction. He had been sentenced to his only other stint in prison for stealing a souped-up El Camino in 1975.

He'd been locked up a year and got paroled on his 19th birthday.

With his parents' help, he got a new truck and machinist job and stayed clean for four months, but then those familiar arguments arose over his hair length and curfew. He took off on his own once more. It was a big mistake.

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At a local pool hall, he met up with old friends from the drug scene and soon was immersed in a narcotic haze.

On Oct. 2, 1977, the 20-year-old Eubanks ran out of drugs and money while partying. So he and a 16-year-old friend decided to replenish their supply by burglarizing the home of an apartment maintenance man in Houston that the teen knew. They found only \$45, a small marijuana stash and a few items, but the racket woke up the apartment owner, Larry Teague, who had been asleep.

Eubanks, armed with a sledgehammer, struck Teague and then strangled him with a leather bullwhip taken from the wall. "I panicked. (Teague) weighed 50 pounds more than me," Eubanks said. "I felt if he got to me that I'd be in trouble."

Eubanks and his teenage accomplice, Michael Pittman, were arrested within three days. Pittman testified against Eubanks for a reduced 15-year sentence.

Eubanks' girlfriend was pregnant, but their son wasn't born until after Eubanks was jailed for the murder. He only got one chance to hold the infant before he was whisked away.

Although thankful for not receiving the death penalty, Eubanks told his girlfriend to forget about him. "You need to focus on the baby," he said. "I'm never getting out of here."

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When Eubanks arrived at the Eastham Unit north of Huntsville in 1978, his cellmate told him, "This is the end of the world."

It didn't take long for Eubanks to make a name for himself.

He fought so often he was placed on the prison boxing team. He then helped organize a "work strike" in support of prison reform. That landed him in solitary.

His heart was hardened. None of his adopted family members visited him in prison.

His outlook changed gradually as years passed, beginning when he bet a pound of coffee that he could earn his high school diploma. He did it, and he went on to earn his associate's degree from Lee College in 1984 and his bachelor's in humanities from University of Houston-Clear Lake through correspondence classes in 1999.

He became a peer health educator, instructing inmates on tuberculosis and AIDS.

"Through all this, I found myself hanging around different people who weren't as wild," he said. "Many were Christians, whose lives seemed smoother, with less uncertainty and anger."

So when a friend gave him his first Bible, he read it from cover to cover.

He eventually asked his mentor, Rabbi Jim Pratt, to pray with him that the man he killed might somehow know his deep regret. None of the victim's relatives had attended the trial, and Eubanks knows no way to find them.

"Saying you're sorry isn't enough," he said. "I did something for which there is no excuse."

He had been eligible for parole since 1997 — but now, despite five rejections, he held onto a glimmer of hope that he might just get that second chance.

And then he got word that his name made the list of those to be paroled in July once he became the first capital murderer to complete a pre-release program at a Christian prison in Sugar Land. Founded in 1997, the unit requires inmates who volunteer to go there to attend Bible studies as well as learn about life skills and substance abuse.

Once he learned he won his freedom, he sat down and cried.

He had barely squeaked past with the necessary five of seven votes from the state's parole board. Harris County prosecutors sent a letter of protest based on the "sheer brutality of the crime."

Family members of his murder victim could not be reached for comment, but the Houston mayor's crime victim advocate, Andy Khan, found Eubanks' release "surreal," believing anyone committing such an insidious act should remain imprisoned until he dies. In the past 14 years, nearly 2,000 capital murderers serving life sentences have been eligible for parole in Texas, but only 3 percent made it, records show.

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The granting of Eubanks' parole was his first surprise.

One of his Christian exit courses was taught by former district Attorney Carol Vance, who was not only the namesake of the Sugar Land unit but also a prosecutor who helped send Eubanks to prison.

"I recognized him the moment he walked in the room," Eubanks said. "I once hated him with a passion, but now I admire him."

Although Vance said he's been conned before, he said he would trust Eubanks as his next-door neighbor.

Upon his release, he moved to the Isaiah House, a halfway house in northeast Houston. He landed a job quickly, working as sales manager for an electric sign company.

However, the most amazing development has been finding his biological family.

He went to an address in Conroe that was the last known address for one of his adopted brothers. He spoke to an 80-year-old white-haired woman through a locked gate whom he didn't recognize at first, but she turned out to be his adopted mother, Faye.

"I want to apologize for the way I put you through hell," he told her.

He hoped to restore their relationship, but the next day she called to say she wasn't ready for that yet.

At the same time, she did confirm that his biological mother was her sister — whom he had known as "Aunt Betty" — and that she was living in Baytown.

He then learned the mystery behind his adoption. Betty Brown released him to her sister to save his life because he was so scrawny, weighing only 8 pounds at six months.

Brown had been recently divorced and could not afford medical care. Tests eventually revealed that Eubanks was starving because of his allergy to milk. He was switched to coconut milk and thrived.

Eubanks also learned that Brown's son Warren Gable was his brother. Her daughter, Brenda Harris, was his half-sister. While they'd visited together when Eubanks lived in Lubbock, he had thought of them as his aunt and cousins.

They recently arranged to meet again at Gable's home near Brenham.

When Brown saw her son again after all these years, she ran to hug him.

"I was so glad that I forgot that he had a bad past," she said. "I don't know what I'm stepping into, but I feel like my sister has given him back to me, and I want my son to have a second chance."

Eubanks blinked back tears at the reunion, especially when they surprised him with a cake in honor of his birthday that month.

He was also overwhelmed when he was later reunited with his only son, Michael Small, now 31, of Katy. He's a U.S. Army Reserve staff sergeant who recently returned from Afghanistan.

"He turned out so good," Eubanks said.

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