

Man Who Was Sentenced by A Norfolk Judge To 2 Life Terms for Stealing \$550 Finally Tastes Freedom

By MARGARET MATRAY

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | JUN 27, 2018 | 3:06 PM



Vandy Singleton wipes away a tear as her husband, Lenny, talks about the future after Lenny Singleton was released from St. Bride's prison in Chesapeake on Wednesday, June 27, 2018, after being pardoned by former Gov. Terry McAuliffe this past January. In the 1990s, a Norfolk judge sentenced Singleton to two life terms plus 110 years in prison for a series of "grab and dash" robberies in which no one was injured and Singleton made off with only \$550. (Stephen Katz)

CHESAPEAKE

Vandy Singleton stood outside the prison for nearly two hours waiting for signs that her husband was coming out.

Each time a van pulled up, a small group gathered for his release grew quiet.

"Is it him?" his wife asked.

Then, just after 9:30 a.m., a maroon truck turned into the parking lot.

Before it could stop, Vandy Singleton walked toward it and clapped.

The front door swung open; Lenny Singleton stepped out.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said. He hugged and kissed his wife for the first time as a free man.

"Welcome home," a supporter called out.

Pardoned by then-Gov. Terry McAuliffe earlier this year, Singleton was released Wednesday morning from St. Brides Correctional Center in southern Chesapeake after serving 23 years behind bars.

In the 1990s, a Norfolk judge sentenced Singleton to two life terms plus 110 years in prison for a week long spree of robberies in which he made off with a total of \$550. No one was injured, and Singleton was unarmed in all but one robbery, in which he carried a table knife, according to his attorney.

Singleton was addicted to crack cocaine at the time and was hoping to be sentenced to a drug court program when he pleaded guilty.

In his pardon, McAuliffe said the court "unjustly imposed a deeply severe punishment." Singleton's attorney, John Coggeshall, estimates it has cost taxpayers about a half-million dollars to incarcerate Singleton over the past two decades.

As he stood in the parking lot Wednesday, Singleton held his wife's hand and talked about the future.

"Wow," the 51-year-old said. "So, what's next?"

Lenny and Vandy Singleton met in high school in Oklahoma and reconnected in 2012, after she found out about his case while searching for him online. The two married while he was incarcerated in 2015.

Vandy Singleton said she's spent about four hours a day for the past six years advocating for him. She wrote the governor and the president the first day she heard about the case, she said.

"And I just never stopped," she said.

The Singletons contacted Coggeshall after reading about another one of his clients, Travion Blount, who was sentenced to serve more than six life terms for his role in a 2006 Norfolk robbery when he was 15.

In 2016, Coggeshall filed a petition seeking a conditional pardon for Singleton. In January, McAuliffe pardoned three of Coggeshall's clients: Blount, Singleton and Travis Hassan May.

Coggeshall said the severity of Singleton's punishment didn't fit the crimes. He said he knows his client will make a positive mark on society now that he's out.

"I can't think of a more deserving person. I really, really can't," he said. "This truly is a celebration day."

On Wednesday, Singleton held onto his wife as he answered questions from reporters and shook hands with his lawyer and Jason Flom, a music executive who has advocated for Singleton's case and sits on boards at the Innocence Project and Families Against Mandatory Minimums.

Singleton said he blames himself for his crimes; he's not angry at the judge or the criminal justice system. He and his wife plan to start a website to help others who are getting out of prison.

In the meantime, he wants to eat a steak cooked over an open flame and spend time with his wife.

He left prison with a box of his belongings, but there was one item he carried in his hands: a book called "Love Conquers All" that he and his wife wrote together several years ago about their lives.

He thumbed through it in the parking lot, showing black-and-white photographs of their high school portraits and images of his wife's home in Utah – trees, rolling hills.

"This is where she lives," Singleton said.

His wife corrected him.

"Where we live," she said.