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A Tuesday Like Any Other Day, a Holiday, for an Exonerated Woman

By [CLYDE HABERMAN](#)

Letter by letter, Cathy Watkins removed her name from a roster it should never have been on. This was a list of two dozen prison inmates, their names entered on a board maintained by [Centurion Ministries](#) in Princeton, N.J. Centurion advocates on behalf of men and women like those on that board, people it believes were locked up for crimes they did not commit. People like Cathy Watkins.

In a brief ceremony the other day, she pried her name free, a letter at a time, affirming with a physical act what had already been settled juridically. It was, she said later, a moment fraught with emotion.

"That felt really liberating," she said. "It showed me that it's actually over."

"It" was her nearly two decades behind bars for the murder of Baithe Diop, a Senegalese immigrant shot to death in January 1995 as he drove his livery cab in the Soundview neighborhood of the Bronx. In 1997 Ms. Watkins was found guilty of the killing along with four men, and sentenced to a long prison term -- no less than 25 years, possibly for life.

Normally, that would have been that. But a federal investigator found reason years later to look deeper, and [he concluded](#) that the actual killers were former gang members with whom Mr. Diop had had dealings. The investigator's findings were persuasive. In late October, Ms. Watkins and another defendant, Eric Glisson, were provisionally set free. Early this month, the Bronx [district attorney agreed](#) that all the convictions should be thrown out. And so it was done, though the other three defendants remain in prison for a separate killing related to the Diop murder.

"It just feels good to know that now everybody knows that I was actually telling the truth over so many years," Ms. Watkins said on Sunday. "I don't have to constantly keep saying, 'I'm innocent, I'm innocent.'"

This is a season when people typically take stock of their lives and assess what may lie ahead. For Ms. Watkins, inevitable uncertainties loom.

At 45, she needs to figure out where to settle down. She has a daughter and three grandchildren in Augusta, Ga., but she doesn't see herself moving there. For now, she

lives with friends in upstate New York - she preferred in a phone conversation to keep the location to herself - but she may relocate to New Jersey if a job at Centurion Ministries materializes.

What she might do long-term is an unknown, including how to put to use the college degree in sociology that [she earned](#) during her years at the Bedford Hills state prison for women in Westchester County.

More immediately, there are basic tasks, like the computer skills that must be learned and a driver's license that has to be obtained. Saturday for her meant five hours in a driver's education class.

And there are changes in quotidian life to absorb. We're not talking here about a Rip Van Winkle effect. Still, after being away for years, Ms. Watkins was astounded by "the huge variety of things" on supermarket shelves, and mystified at "seeing people walking around so distracted with this telephone business, these cellphones" (not that it takes years of being locked up to make one wonder why so many people feel compelled to be digitally connected every waking moment).

She has her faith to get her through the transition, and beyond. She belongs to the Jehovah's Witnesses, a denomination that she says she embraced at Bedford Hills. "First and foremost was my spiritual development there," she said. "Being spiritually grounded is what's helping me to endure."

As a Jehovah's Witness, Ms. Watkins doesn't celebrate Christmas, but, she said, "it's like every day is a holiday for me now." She also said she harbored no ill feelings about a criminal justice system that thoroughly failed her.

"It doesn't justify anything that was done to me," she said. "When you have people who are put in positions to uphold the law, that's what should be happening. But I've learned that I'm dealing with imperfect people, fallible human beings who are going to make mistakes."

"Some people just do things wrong and don't have good hearts, but I couldn't let that embitter me," she said. "You have to forgive. Holding anything against them would just kind of poison my soul. I had to let go of that. But I never let go of hope, because my truth was the truth. I always trusted that one day it would prevail. And it has."

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