

MIETRO

Wrongly Imprisoned Va. Man Is Freed

Allen Grants Pardon in '84 Rape Case

By Peter Baker
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BURKEVILLE, Va., Oct. 21—Edward William Honaker walked out of prison today, a free man for the first time in a decade. Suddenly the razor-edged fences no longer looked so high. Finally he could enjoy the crisp autumn colors. And no more would he have to wear the clothes that had symbolized his long ordeal.

"My God, I hate this thing," he said as he ripped off his blue prison shirt and flung it to the ground.

Then, still clad in blue jeans and a worn white undershirt, the man wrongly convicted of a 1984 rape walked away from Nottoway Correctional Center. A guard called out congratulations and good luck from an open window. Honaker walked up to a rented cherry-red Buick Skylark and held his closed fists in front of

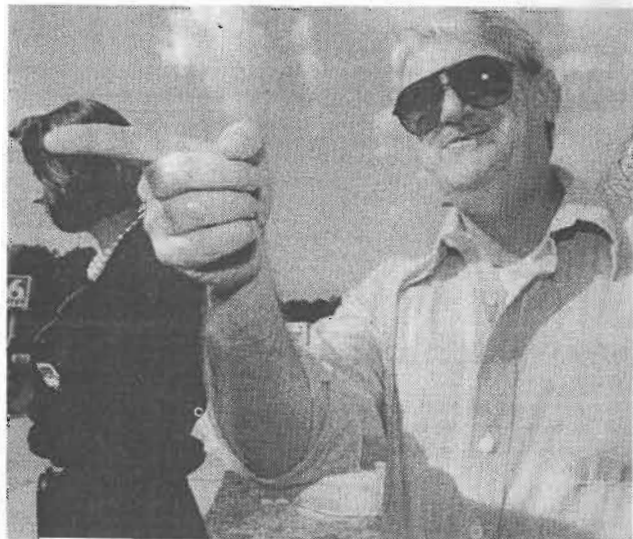
him as if waiting for something. "Where are the handcuffs?" he asked with a laugh.

There are no more handcuffs for Ed Honaker, no more shackles, no more bars, no more prison cafeteria swill. Nearly 10 years to the day after Honaker was incarcerated, Gov. George Allen called to say that DNA tests had persuaded him to grant the 44-year-old carpenter-welder an absolute pardon.

"He did extend an apology, and I graciously accepted it," Honaker said. "It really wasn't necessary. 'Ed, you're a free man' was all I wanted to hear."

The moment Allen called, Honaker looked down at his watch. It was 10:28 a.m. He cried as the governor talked. "That was a very traumatic moment for me," he said later. "I

See HONAKER, B2, Col. 1



Edward Honaker walks away from the Burkeville prison where he was held.

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Va. Man Freed After a Decade Wrongly Imprisoned for Rape

HONAKER, From B1

was kind of numb throughout that whole conversation. I handled it a lot worse than I expected I would."

For someone robbed of nearly a quarter of his life, Honaker seemed remarkably free of bitterness today. He chatted amiably outside the prison doors, expressing little resentment toward the system that sent him away or the then-19-year-old rape victim who identified him at trial and even now remains convinced that he is guilty.

"I feel sorry for her," Honaker said. "I know she has suffered through an ordeal, but I don't think she has suffered any more than I have. I have no animosity toward her. It troubles me to think that she still thinks I did this, despite the evidence. That's something that'll probably bother me for the rest of my life."

Honaker was arrested in October 1984 after a police officer decided he bore an uncanny resemblance to a composite sketch of the burly man in camouflaged clothing who had raped a young woman along the Blue Ridge Parkway four months earlier.

He was convicted largely on her

identification—secretly enhanced by hypnosis, as it was later disclosed—and sentenced to three life terms plus 34 years behind bars.

Only last winter did new DNA genetic testing of a vaginal swab determine that sperm found in the victim could not have come from either Honaker or the woman's boyfriend, thus pointing to the existence of another man, presumably the real rapist. A series of follow-up tests confirmed the conclusion this month.

"If this technology can be relied upon to convict the guilty, it should also be relied upon to protect the innocent," Allen said at a news conference announcing his decision four months after the clemency petition was filed.

Allen, a Republican who has made crime-fighting his main focus in his first year in office, defended the amount of time it took to free Honaker. "I think we went at it at the proper pace," he said. "I wanted to make absolutely sure that I was doing the right thing. I'm not going to be stampeded."

While expressing sympathy and good wishes, Allen said he did not agree with Honaker that the state

owes the pardoned inmate compensation for the lost years.

"I have great confidence in our system of justice and the ability of judges and juries to find the truth," he said, calling cases like Honaker's exceedingly rare. "As far as I'm concerned, this entire effort shows that the system does work as far as the opportunity for someone to introduce new evidence."

Under Virginia law, new evidence cannot be submitted to a court more than 21 days after conviction, meaning that someone later found not guilty by foolproof scientific data must appeal to the governor for clemency.

"That's a statute that really needs to be changed," said Honaker's attorney, Barry C. Scheck, who flew from New York for the occasion.

By today, the legalities mattered little to Ed Honaker. He didn't sleep at all Thursday night, awaiting word of Allen's decision. When it finally came, he packed up some belongings, some pen-and-ink drawings, his legal papers, some novels and short stories he had written. He gave his collection of dead beetles to a friend and said goodbye. Standing outside the prison, he choked up briefly

when he mentioned the friends left behind.

His never-say-die champion, Kate Germond, who is an investigator with a New Jersey advocacy group called Centurion Ministries, picked him up at the prison 55 miles southwest of Richmond. They drove immediately to a shopping mall, where he bought a new shirt—this one a bright yellow polo—and a camel-hair coat. When he arrived at the steps of the State Capitol in Richmond for a news conference, his older sister, Dolores Bennett, was there and hugged him tightly.

Honaker was a little vague on his plans. Later tonight he intended to see a woman he fell in love with at a prison social, and soon he will contact his three teenage children. He wants to sell his writings, horror stories along the lines of his favorite, Stephen King, and probably will return to welding in Roanoke.

He made clear that a lawsuit against the state is all but certain, but there was little dwelling on that today. This was a day for rejoicing.

"It's the greatest feeling in the world," he said. "The only thing I can compare it with is the birth of my first child. This is more of a resurrection."