

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Friday, October 1, 1993

50 cents outside the eight-county Philadelphia metropolitan area



The Philadelphia Inquirer / J. KYLE KEENER

While appearing on the "AM Philadelphia" TV program, freed inmate Edward Ryder got a surprise visit from pen pal Carmen Winant, 10. Carmen began writing to Ryder after reading about his story.

For Edward Ryder, it was a day of lights, cameras and a true friend.

First day of freedom brings sweet surprises for inmate

By Howard Goodman
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The 9-year-old girl from West Mount Airy read the newspaper account, decided the inmate was wrongly convicted, and felt so moved by his plight that she wrote to him.

For half a year, Carmen Winant and Edward Ryder exchanged letters. "They helped me survive," said Ryder, who began a life sentence in 1973 for a gang-style jailhouse murder that he and others, including two of the admitted killers, insisted he did not commit.

Now everything is different. Acting Gov. Mark Singel commuted Ryder's sentence on Sept. 17, signaling an imminent rescue from 20 years of a prison term that might have had no end.

Yesterday, the 42-year-old from North Philadelphia and the young Jewish girl met at last — under the glare of television lights on a morning talk-show stage set.

In one of the odd juxtapositions by which celebrity is confirmed in modern America, last week's denizen of Graterford Prison's A-block was yesterday's guest on *AM Philadelphia*,

sitting with his legs crossed on an upholstered chair in the relaxed, attentive posture familiar to every viewer.

Though the situation was staged, the emotion was genuine. Host Wally Kennedy was reminding Ryder of the little girl who became his pen pal, and Ryder was just looking up at the camera to say hello to her over the air, when Carmen was suddenly led in from the wings.

"No!" cried Ryder, exhaling in surprise.

They embraced. Ryder wiped away
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Day of surprises for freed inmate

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tears.

"This little girl said something to me that was so profound," Ryder said a moment later. "She told me she was writing because it was Passover, and she called it the human liberation holiday. I thought about that a lot. . . ."

"To me, she's smarter than the average adult. She's a compassionate young lady."

Carmen, now a 10-year-old who wrote "P.S. — I'm very shy" on the back of her last letter, was a composed conversationalist on camera.

"I hoped he'd get out," she said, "and that we'd see him some day."

It was a day of firsts for Ryder. His first look at the outside world since 1984, when he attended a post-conviction hearing. His first chat on a cellular phone ("Look at that!" he said, as if it were a device from Buck Rogers). His first restaurant meal in 20 years (chicken-fried steak, scrambled eggs, hash browns, toast and a strawberry milkshake).

"I feel like I missed a lot," Ryder said, standing in a parking lot on City Avenue, surrounded by buzzing traffic, the comings and goings of free citizens, "but I feel like I belong here. This is my world. I feel like I have an absolute right to be here."

"It's been a long time, and I'm going to make the best of the time I've got."

Ryder is still housed at Graterford, although in a prefab dormitory for trusted inmates, outside the prison walls. Though the accommodations are basic, the dorm is much more pleasant than the crowded, clanging atmosphere of the massive cell blocks in which he had been swallowed for two decades.

Prison officials moved Ryder to the 124-man Outside Service Unit on Sept. 23, part of a graduated re-entry to the world. On Monday, he is scheduled to be moved to a halfway house in the Temple University neighborhood of North Philadelphia, accord-

ing to Tom Rogosky, director of the state Corrections Department's community corrections division.

Ryder will stay at the 37-man row-house center, under low-intensity supervision, for an unknown number of weeks, while the Board of Probation and Parole approves plans for his independent housing and employment. Under the conditions of the commutation, Ryder will be on lifetime parole.

Darlene Ryder, Edward's sister, says she has a room ready for him to move into. She owns a home near Fifth Street and Allegheny Avenue, one of North Philadelphia's most notorious drug zones.

"I've already told the drug dealers, leave him alone, clear a path for my brother," Darlene said.

Alan LeFebvre, a deputy superintendent, drove Ryder to Channel 6's studios in an unmarked Corrections Department minivan.

Ryder was wide-eyed at cars, at houses.

"I told him he'd need an automobile to get around and asked him what kind he wanted," LeFebvre said. "He said he hadn't thought about it. Maybe a Riviera. I told him that might not be too realistic. How about something more like a Toyota?"

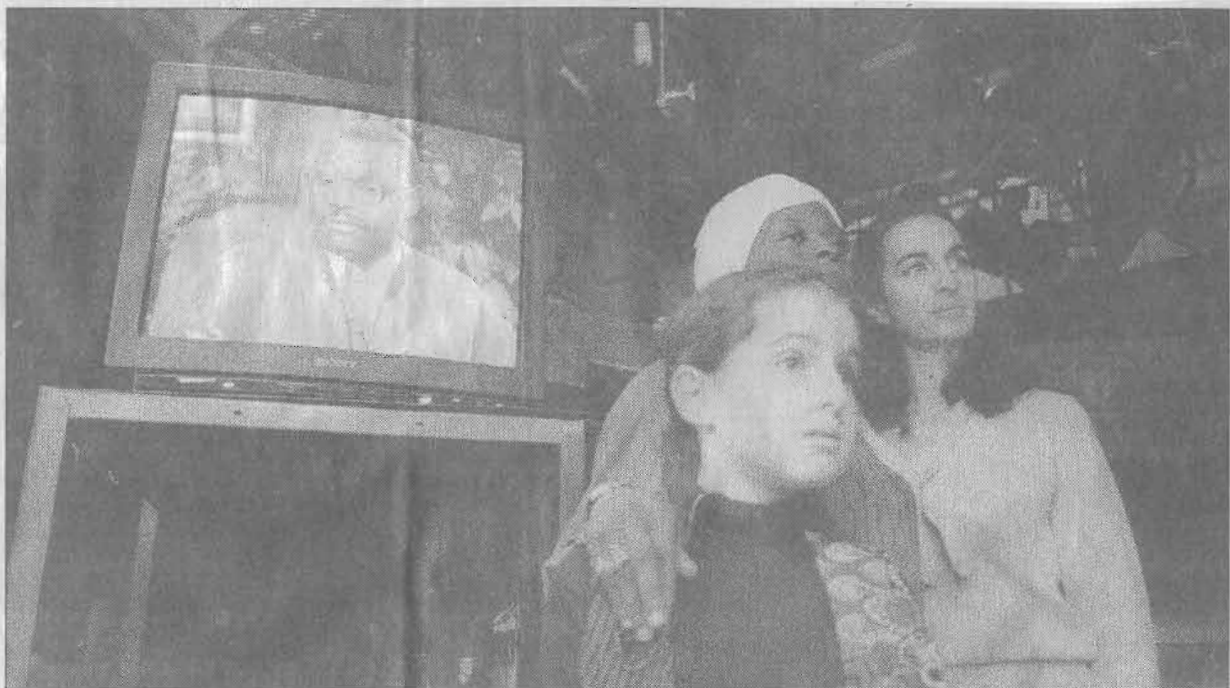
"He's going to have a lot to get used to."

LeFebvre added, "He said he can't wait to have a bath. You get showers in prison, a lot of showers, but we don't have baths."

"He's gone 20 years without a bath."

His entrance to the studio startled longtime supporters and relatives who had gathered to greet him or appear on the show. Gone was the downtrodden inmate with the perpetually worried mien. Walking in was a bright young man on the go, in slacks and tie and a silk-satin jacket and a satisfied gaze behind brown-rimmed glasses.

"He looks so great," marveled



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Waiting backstage are Carmen Winant (left), 10, Edward Ryder's sister, Darlene, (center) and Carmen's mother, Debbie Rogow. Ryder will leave Graterford soon after serving 20 years for murder.

James McCloskey, the lay minister from Princeton whose detective work and advocacy had been instrumental in gaining Ryder's release. "Even the gray hairs are gone."

Ryder was overflowing with talk, giddy with good spirits.

His every move was recorded by a crew making a film about Centurion Ministries Inc., the one-of-a-kind organization headed by McCloskey that works for the release of inmates it believes are innocent.

McCloskey was the last — and most effective — of a long series of people who tried to free Ryder, going back to the late 1970s. Advocates included former Philadelphia Daily News columnist Chuck Stone, Philadelphia Sheriff John Green and a number of jazz musicians who had become impressed with Ryder's character and musical talent. He sings and plays trumpet.

Ryder was one of four men convicted of first-degree murder in the killing of Holmesburg Prison inmate Samuel Molton. At 22, Ryder was in Holmesburg awaiting trial on a theft charge when a gang of inmates stabbed Molton to death.

McCloskey and attorney Leonard

Sosnov exposed flaws in the original conviction and found an overlooked witness who said Ryder was not among the gang of killers. They tried to persuade the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office to support a move to overturn the conviction. When that failed, they spearheaded the effort to seek a commutation by the governor, a rarely used method of release in Pennsylvania. By state law, every life sentence is to be life without parole.

When The Inquirer published news of Ryder's commutation hearing last spring, Debbie Rogow showed the article to her two daughters. "I told them that if they were going to stay home from school for Passover, they should do something for freedom," Rogow said.

Daughter Carmen Winant, who attends the Miquon School, wrote to Ryder. Johanna, a year older, wrote to principals of several Philadelphia schools, urging them to find work for Ryder. The principal of Johanna's own school, Springside School, said that at the least, she would invite Ryder to talk to students and play music at an assembly.

"Eddie wrote beautiful letters," Ro-

gow said. "He said just the right things. He called Carmen his 'little buddy' and told her to stay away from bad kids."

At Denny's — a restaurant chain that had not yet come to Philadelphia before Ryder's arrest — Ryder looked both delighted and dazed as he looked at the colorful, book-like menu.

"What'll you have?" someone asked.

"Oh, anything," he said, as if it hadn't occurred to him that he had to make a choice. In 20 years of prison, none of life's daily choices have been his to decide. Someone else told him when to eat, what to eat, what to wear, when to turn out the lights.

Kate Germond, a Centurion Ministries worker, spoke quietly at his side and helped him choose a meal.

He ate slowly, savoring every taste, as delighted a customer as Denny's ever had. His finished his strawberry shake by licking the ice cream from his upper lip and spreading a wide, satisfied smile.

"Ahhh, man," he said, sinking royally into the banquette, "livin' it up, now."