



DAN Z. JOHNSON / Suburban Staff Photographer

After serving Louis C. Mickens-Thomas his first meal in freedom, waitress Kim Galbraith — whose 22-year-old son is serving 10 years in prison — hugs him at the Silver Star Diner in Allentown. A TV news crew there got him noticed.

## After 40 years in jail, freedom is oh, so sweet

*Louis C. Mickens-Thomas, convicted of murder, savors his first day out of jail.*

By Oliver Prichard  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Eight years after a Pennsylvania governor said he could go free, Louis C. Mickens-Thomas walked out of Graterford Prison yesterday after serving 40 years for a child murder he insisted he didn't commit.

Mickens-Thomas, 75, left the state prison, his home since it opened in 1970, and limped his way to a car waiting to take to a halfway house in Allentown.

From the front seat, he talked of having "eggs over light" — a favorite denied him in prison — and asked how to use an ATM. He mistook a cell phone for a radio, and said holding a grudge against the justice system would bring him "no satisfaction."

At an impromptu news conference just off the prison grounds, Mickens-Thomas fought back tears as TV news crews jostled for position.

Did you ever expect this day to come?

"I wasn't always sure," he answered softly.

What are you going to do now?

"Have a breakfast — eggs over light, toast, and french fries," he said.

When he was asked what he would say to the family of 12-year-old Edith Connor, whom he was twice convicted of murdering, tears welled up behind his eyeglasses. The Connor family remains convinced of his guilt.

"I know you're hurting, and I understand your anger," Mickens-Thomas said.

"I wish there was some way I could comfort you, but I can't. ... What about me? What about my three children, who were raised without a father who really loved them? I need comforting, too."

Mickens-Thomas, a former West Philadelphia cobbler, was freed by a Jan. 14 federal court order that criticized the Pennsylvania parole board's refusal to grant his release. Despite former Gov. Robert P. Casey's 1995 order to commute his sentence of life without parole, the administrations of Govs. Tom Ridge and Mark Schweiker refused to honor the recommendation.

The family of Edith Connor, who was found raped and strangled in 1964 in an alley behind Mickens-Thomas' shoe repair shop near 40th Street and Girard Avenue, is outraged at his release.

They are "devastated over the knowledge that the man who murdered their 12-year-old angel has been permitted to walk free," according to a statement released yesterday by talk-radio host Michael Smerconish, who is serving as their attorney.

In 1964, Mickens-Thomas was a Korean War veteran with an ex-wife, two children, and a heavy drinking habit. He had moved from New York a few months before the girl's body was found near the building where he lived and fixed shoes.

Investigators said they found shoe-wax residue on the girl's clothing. Mickens-Thomas became the suspect.

At trial, the state's primary witness, crime lab technician Edith Mallatratt Douglas, linked fibers from Edith Connor's clothing to Mickens-Thomas' repair shop. He was convicted and sentenced to life without parole.

Douglas was later exposed as a fraud for falsifying her academic and professional credentials, earning Mickens-Thomas a new trial. But after Douglas' supervisor in the crime lab vouched for the integrity of the evidence, Mickens-Thomas was again convicted. Neither of the juries had been told about Douglas' serial perjury.

Mickens-Thomas was a model prisoner, earning a bachelor's degree from Villanova University while behind bars.

"I cried for years because I lost everything I had," he said, until his Christian Science faith helped him cope. "But I didn't see any value in being angry. I had to get on with my life."

Since 1991, he has had the support of Centurion Ministries, a New Jersey group that works to free inmates it believes are innocent.

Two Centurion executives and Mickens-Thomas' lawyer escorted him from Graterford yesterday.

On the ride to the halfway house, where Mickens-Thomas has been ordered to spend an undetermined period, Jim McCloskey, head of Centurion Ministries, phoned Mickens-Thomas' youngest daughter, Mary Thomas Mason, 39.

Mason was born two months after her father was incarcerated and could not make the trip from New York for his release. McCloskey handed his cell phone to

Mickens-Thomas, who had never used one before.

"Just put it up to your ear and talk," McCloskey told him.

Mickens-Thomas did. Then he smiled.

"Oh, just to hear your voice," he said. "You don't have to worry anymore. We'll see each other. It'll be all right."

He said goodbye, and surveyed the snowy landscape outside the car.

"Don't think I'm missing anything," he said. "I'm taking it all in."

He revealed in wearing civilian clothes — corduroy pants, wool sweater, knit cap and leather shoes. When he was inmate No. AF0443, a brown prison uniform was his only option.

"I don't even want to think of that brown color," he said. "These are some very nice leisure clothes. Very good quality."

He pulled out a \$548 check from the Inmate General Welfare Fund, earnings from his jobs at Graterford.

"Listen, tell me something," Mickens-Thomas said. "How do you use an ATM?"

The car stopped at a highway rest stop, where Mickens-Thomas ate a cinnamon pastry and used the restroom. "That was a pleasure, to do it without handcuffs and shackles," he said.

Upon arriving at the halfway house, Mickens-Thomas was introduced to the staff and released for lunch. He and his supporters headed for the nearby Silver Star Diner. Each booth had a small jukebox, and Mickens-Thomas scoured the machine for a familiar tune. There were Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, Bon Jovi.

"Young people stuff," he said, opting for no music.

He ordered a big meal — four eggs, home fries, scrapple, two orders of wheat toast, and coffee — and ate every bite.

"They could have done better with the potatoes," he said. "But the eggs were good."

With a TV news crew filming Mickens-Thomas, his story quickly spread through the diner.

A waitress, Kim Galbraith, approached and told him she was a single mother whose 22-year-old son was serving 10 years in prison. She said his story had given her hope. They hugged, and she cried.

"Tell him he can do it," Mickens-Thomas told her. "Ten years is nothing."

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Mickens-Thomas is savoring the little things in life now that he's on the outside.