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Savoring freedom



The Philadelphia Inquirer / TODD BUCHANAN

Embracing his fiancée, Matthew Connor celebrates his release from prison after serving 12 years of a life sentence for a 1978 slaying he says he didn't commit.

Connor, 53, of Philadelphia, got out of the State Correctional Institution at Dallas yesterday, free on bond and awaiting a new trial. Story on Page 1-B.

Ex-inmate rejoices in his new freedom

By Robin Clark
Inquirer Staff Writer

DALLAS, Pa. — He arrived in chains. He left in a limousine.

After spending 12 years behind bars for a murder he said he didn't commit, Matthew Connor walked out of prison yesterday, free on bail and looking forward to a new trial.

Connor, 53, traded his prison jumpsuit for civilian clothes about 1:15 p.m. and, minutes later, was engulfed in the welcoming hugs of his fiancée, his attorney and the crusading minister who helped win his release.

"You're a free man, Matt — free!" said the minister, James McCloskey, beaming at the big man who had been locked away since Frank L. Rizzo was mayor, since Ali fought Spinks for the heavyweight title.

"This is the happiest day of my life," Connor said, planting a kiss on the lips of fiancée Doris Gray.

Standing outside the hilltop prison, with its fence topped in razor wire, Connor warmed his face in the sun and described his plans in simple terms: "I just want to get off this mountain and get on with my life."

And eat a T-bone steak for dinner, he added.

"I'll cook him whatever he wants," Doris Gray said. "This is like a

dream, and it's still unfolding."

As the group climbed into a chauffeur-driven Lincoln Silverhawk for the three-hour trip back to Philadelphia, Connor turned and waved to a small crowd of prison officials and reporters who had gathered to witness his departure.

"So long, everyone," he said.

Until last week, Connor faced the prospect of spending the rest of his life in prison.

That was the sentence he received after being found guilty of the August 1978 rape and stabbing murder of Corinthea Fields, an 11-year-old whose body was found in a stairwell of the Fairhill public-housing project in North Philadelphia.

Then, six years ago, Connor's life took another fateful turn.

A fellow inmate, believing Connor innocent of the murder, wrote a letter to McCloskey, whose Centurion Ministries dedicates itself to freeing people it believes have been wrongly imprisoned.

McCloskey took the case and, with help from attorney Dennis Cogan, uncovered evidence that had not surfaced in Connor's trial. The evidence suggested that Corinthea Fields was not killed by Connor but

(See RELEASED on 2-B)

Ex-inmate rejoices in his freedom

RELEASED, from 1-B
by her half-brother, who has since
died.

Last week, Common Pleas Court
Judge Albert F. Sabo granted Connor
a new trial.

And yesterday, Cogan, Gray and
McCloskey got to savor the fruit of
their faith and labor — posting
\$25,000 cash bail at Philadelphia City
Hall, then jumping into a donated
limo to fetch Connor.

As the welcoming party sped up
the Northeast Extension of the Penn-
sylvania Turnpike, Connor en-
grossed himself in the delicious ritu-
al of checking out of the squat, two-
story prison that has been his home
for so long.

About 1 p.m., Connor was escorted
from his small cell on D-Annex to the
prison administration building,
where he signed a claim form for the
\$165.55 in his account.

He discarded his plum-colored
prison garb for civilian clothes: dark
trousers, a gray striped shirt and a
blue ski jacket.

Then he walked slowly toward the
front gate, followed by another in-
mate who carried the large black
trunk containing Connor's belong-
ings, the most precious of which was
a portable radio his mother had given
him shortly after he arrived in prison
— and just months before she died.

Connor said he had managed to
sleep about two hours Thursday
night. "There were a thousand
things going around in my head,
going back through the years," he
said. "I believe I've about gotten past
the bitterness. It's the suffering I'm
still dealing with."

Looking up, Connor saw something
that quickly changed his mood.

"There they are! Oh, boy!" he said,
throwing open his arms as Gray, Co-
gan and McCloskey burst into the
office.

"I've been waiting for this for
years," Gray said, wrapping her arms
around Connor's broad back.

"It's good to see you on this side,"
Cogan said, taking the next embrace.

McCloskey stood back, beaming at
the reunion. "Golly, Matt, you look



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Connor and fiancée Doris Gray walk through the prison gate.

great," he said finally, moving up to
take the longest, hardest hug.

"This is the most wonderful man
I've ever known in my life," Connor
said. "I owe him."

Although Connor is the eighth
prisoner to be freed through McClos-
key's efforts, the repetition has not
diminished the sense of satisfaction.

"It's just pure joy when an inno-
cent person is finally freed and vin-
dicated from a life sentence," Mc-
Closkey said.

Gray said that she and Connor
planned to be married as soon as

arrangements could be made and
that they would live in her house in
Northeast Philadelphia.

"The first thing he wants is just to
relax and get used to being in society
again," she said. "His family is dead, so
my family has just taken him over."

Before leaving, Connor dropped by
the administration building to say
goodbye to Joseph Ryan, the prison
superintendent.

"I'm going to miss you, Matthew,"
Ryan said warmly, offering his hand.

"I'll miss you, too, Mr. Ryan," Con-
nor said. "But I won't miss this jail."