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The Times

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Princeton ministry helps man prove innocence

By ROBERT STERN
Staff Writer

A Texas man who spent almost 17 years in prison for a kidnapping and rape that new DNA evidence shows he did not commit received a full pardon yesterday from Texas Gov. George W. Bush.

But without help from a Mercer

County nonprofit group, A. B. "Junior" Butler Jr. likely still would be locked up in a Texas prison, said his oldest sister, Judy Rogers.

Butler's slow road to freedom and vindication began with a letter he wrote from prison to Centurion Ministries Inc. of Princeton Borough, asking the agency to intervene in his case.

"We first heard from A. B. back in

Bush grants full pardon to ex-con

1995," recalls the Rev. Jim McCloskey, Centurion's founder and executive director. "He'd been in prison since December 1983."

McCloskey launched Centurion Ministries about 20 years ago to assist inmates who had been wrongly convicted and are serving life or

death sentences across the country.

The agency fields almost 1,000 requests for help each year from inmates who proclaim their innocence, McCloskey said.

Butler is the 22nd inmate serving a life term or sentenced to die whose freedom or exoneration Cen-

turion has orchestrated.

Now 45, Butler spent almost 17 years of his life behind bars after a Tyler, Texas, woman pegged him as the man who abducted her at knife-point from a hotel parking lot and raped her.

At the time, Butler was serving 10 years probation from an earlier rape case and was identified from mug shots and a police lineup as the rap-

ist-kidnapper in the Tyler case, the Houston Chronicle reported in January.

After reading Butler's first letter to his agency five years ago, McCloskey said he felt the inmate's claims had merit.

Centurion staff members pored

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Pardon

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over the trial transcript and other background of the case for 2½ years, he said.

That, combined with his face-to-face meeting with Butler, convinced McCloskey he was dealing with an innocent man.

"I went down to interview A. B. and came to believe that he was innocent," McCloskey said, recalling shock that the victim's account of the attack was a key to Butler's conviction, rather than his acquittal.

In reviewing the case, McCloskey said, he found that the 25-year-old woman whom Butler had allegedly kidnapped and raped in 1983 had described her attacker as having smoked heavily on the night of the crime. In addition, she had attributed straight, closely bonded teeth to her assailant, McCloskey said.

By contrast, Butler has a large gap between two of his front teeth and is not a smoker, he said.

The victim also identified Butler in court.

Despite three witnesses who testified Butler was with them when the crime occurred, a jury convicted him and he was sentenced to 99 years in prison, the Chronicle reported.

In 1987, he read of DNA analysis and filed the first of many motions to have his blood analyzed. Over the years, those motions repeatedly failed, but Butler persisted.

"There were times when I'd feel like giving up, but then I'd start again," he told the Chronicle after state District Judge Cynthia Kent finally released him on a personal-recognizance bond Jan. 8 this year.

The reason for the judge's decision? Butler — with assistance from Centurion and Randy Schaffer, the Houston defense attorney his Princeton friends tapped for the case — finally got the DNA proof he had sought for so long to clear Butler's name.

DNA TESTS — using semen samples taken from the victim's clothing back in 1983 and a hair found at the



A. B. "Junior" Butler hugs his sisters as he is released from prison in January.

scene and comparing them to DNA taken from samples of Butler's hair and blood — convinced even Smith County District Attorney Jack Skeen that the wrong man was imprisoned in the 1983 Tyler rape case.

The district court judge, district attorney and the sheriff for Smith County then unanimously joined Butler's defense team in petitioning Bush for a full pardon and restoration of full civil rights of citizenship.

Bush granted that pardon yesterday, and Schaffer, Butler's attorney, said he got the news from the governor's office around noon Texas time.

For his part, McCloskey is elated he helped but saddened that Butler spent almost two-thirds of his life in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

"Personally speaking, I'm just thrilled for A. B. because he's free and also completely vindicated," McCloskey said.

After speaking with Butler — whom his sister said is back at work as a dump-truck driver and mechanic for the family owned junk yard — several times yesterday, McCloskey described him simply as being "relieved. It's finally, completely all over."

As for the justice system, McCloskey had no kind words.

"In this case, as in many other cases, the criminal justice system completely misfired, and it did so because of sloppy police work and erroneous, unreliable eyewitness testimony," he said.