

Once condemned, Ramadan Shabazz enjoys his first taste of freedom in more than 50 years

By [Adrian Walker](#) Globe Columnist, Updated March 15, 2023, 1 hour ago



After 51 years behind bars, Ramadan Shabazz walked out of the Old Colony Correctional Center in Bridgewater and was hugged by lawyer Mia Teitelbaum (left) and his girlfriend Elaine Daniels. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

BRIDGEWATER — At precisely 9:53 a.m. Wednesday, wearing a huge smile, Ramadan Shabazz felt the fresh air of freedom for the first time in more than 51 years.

As he exited the Old Colony Correctional Center for the final time, Shabazz, 73, practically bounded through the doors.

After taking note of the mild weather, he paused to reflect on the moment.

“I feel like a bird that’s just been born and flying the coop for the first time,” he said. “He’s free, he realizes he’s free, and he sees everything around him is free.”

Shabazz also expressed his gratitude for the cheering section of advocates who had arrived to escort him to freedom: his partner, Elaine Daniels; the Newton family that tirelessly advocated for his freedom, Dr. Rich Parker and his wife, Chrissy; and his attorney, Mia Teitelbaum. They had come to witness a once-unlikely, indeed almost unimaginable, act of mercy.

Shabazz has never denied responsibility for the Aug. 14, 1971, double murder that saw him sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison. He won his release because he and his supporters built a compelling case that he completely transformed himself while in prison and is no longer the man who committed those crimes.

Shabazz was convicted of killing two security guards in a botched robbery in Dorchester. He had returned from a tour in Vietnam addicted to drugs, and he has said he was attempting to pay off a drug dealer. His jury deliberated for just three hours. Shabazz was initially sentenced to death, a sentence that was reduced to life without parole by the SJC in the mid-1970s after the US Supreme Court called a temporary halt to executions.

Behind the walls — and with little hope of ever leaving — he adopted a new name and a new spirituality and built a different life. Years of commendations attest to his status as a valued member of the Old Colony community, a mentor and inspiration to others.

Shabazz earned two college degrees in prison. He worked in multiple programs at

Bridgewater State Hospital, assisting in the care of troubled inmates, receiving constant positive evaluations and commendations from staff in the process. He successfully completed 48 furloughs, before that program was ended by then-governor Michael Dukakis.

For nearly all that time, there was little likelihood that Shabazz would ever win his freedom. He wasn't even eligible for parole.

But in ways no one could have brought about or foreseen, the atmosphere outside had changed ever so slightly for convicts seeking clemency. Just enough.

He became parole-eligible last year when the Advisory Board of Pardons reduced the charge against him. That happened just as then-governor Charlie Baker was moved, as he neared the end of his State House years, to show compassion to a handful of people behind bars.

Most of the recipients of that largesse were people who had been wrongfully incarcerated to begin with. But he also signaled his willingness to sign off on Shabazz's release as well, should it come to his desk before the end of his term.

And it did.

"I have to give credit to Charlie Baker," Rich Parker told me Wednesday on the ride to prison. "How ironic that we had to wait for a Republican governor."

Give Baker his props. But the real heroes of this story are the Parkers. The bond between them and Shabazz should be the stuff of a movie.

Their connection begins in 1983, when Chrissy Parker's mother, Marjorie Striker, was a volunteer in a group that paid regular visits to prisoners. She and her friends took immediate notice of the tall, quiet, humble man who was always good for a stimulating

conversation.

She began corresponding with him on a regular basis, telling him about her family. Her adult children began to visit him, too. And as her mother's health began to falter in the early 2000s, Chrissy Parker gradually took over the letter-writing, and the visits.

Her family became his family, and his cause became the Parkers' cause.

"He's been a member of our family since around 2005," Chrissy Parker said.

Rich Parker — a Harvard-trained physician and very persistent man — began looking for any levers he could pull to get Ramadan Shabazz a hearing. He and his family were staunch believers that he did not deserve to spend his life in prison.

Many failures followed, before there was a glimmer of hope. But the idea of quitting never seemed to occur to any of them. They just kept pushing his cause.

I visited him in prison in 2020, just a few weeks before the pandemic would have rendered that impossible. Seated in a spartan conference room, two things struck me immediately: his deep sense of remorse, and his optimism. For someone who had been told decades before that he would never again be free, Shabazz had never lost his belief that someday, somehow, things would turn.

Someday was Wednesday.

The notion that someone in prison has paid his debt to society has taken a beating in recent decades, replaced by a hard-core belief that compassion has no place in the realm of incarceration.

But the journey of Ramadan Shabazz powerfully argues otherwise. A Vietnam veteran quite possibly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder did a terrible thing, and then he spent decades molding himself into the person he was always meant to be. Not

to game a system, but for redemption in its purest sense.

Surely, nothing would have been gained — for anyone — by keeping this man in prison.

Now, against all odds, he's free.

He strolled out Wednesday, surrounded by his chosen family.

As he departed the dilapidated grounds of Old Colony, he never looked back.

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