

# Convicted teen Iowa killer leaving prison on work release

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

For the first time in almost 28 years, convicted murderer Yvette Louisell soon will live outside the walls of prison.

The Iowa Board of Parole voted Friday to move her to an Ames work-release program, ending years of legal wrangling that overturned an earlier sentence of life without parole.

Louisell was convicted of first-degree murder in 1987 for the killing of Keith Stilwell inside his Ames home. She was a 17-year-old college student at the time of the murder.

She is one the first Iowa inmates convicted of first-degree murder as a teenager to be granted conditional parole after a 2012 Supreme Court ruling declared that mandatory life-without-parole sentences are an unconstitutional form of cruel and unusual punishment for those who committed their crimes before turning 18.

There are more than 30 Iowa inmates who fall into this category.

"Not everybody believes that people in my category should be given a second chance," Louisell said Friday during the parole hearing. "And really, I'm prepared for people to express negative opinions. ... I just need to be, in those moments, polite, respectful and, if possible, remove myself from the situation."

She has received support from church members, sentencing reform advocates and even the prosecutor who convicted her of murder. They've all argued that Louisell has matured during her decades as an inmate and is ready to be released.

Louisell detailed the accomplishments she has made in the 10 months since her last parole hearing on Friday via a video feed from the Iowa Correctional Facility for Women in Mitchellville. She has a leadership role with a group that prepares inmates for release, and she has taken an increasing number of supervised trips outside the prison.

On Thursday, she rode on a DART bus to the downtown Des Moines headquarters and learned how to read bus schedules and download the transit authority's smartphone app, she said. She earned an instructional driver's permit during a trip to an Iowa Department of Transportation licensing center.

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"Ms. Louisell has done above and beyond all that has been requested of her in the last few years, and certainly the years before that," her attorney, Gordon Allen, told the parole board. "She's ready to move on."

Louisell and Allen spent three years in litigation, which ultimately led a district court judge to set aside her original life-without-parole sentence and open the door for her to one day leave prison.

Her bid for a new sentence went before the Iowa Supreme Court, and the ruling set significant precedent for how Iowa judges can sentence young people convicted of first-degree murder.

Louisell's transition to a work-release facility will not be immediate. There is a waiting list at the Ames facility, parole board chairman John Hodges said.

## Promising future

Louisell had a promising future when she graduated from high school in Michigan at age 16 and accepted a full scholarship to Iowa State University, where she planned to study politics. But she drank heavily and began suffering academically. On Dec. 6, 1987, she stabbed and killed Stilwell, 40, in his Ames home.

Louisell met the older man after taking a job modeling at a local art institute where Stilwell took classes. Stilwell, who was handicapped and needed canes to walk, offered to pay the struggling college student for private modeling sessions at his home.

At her trial, Louisell testified that he cornered her with a knife and threatened to rape her one night after she decided to quit posing privately for him. Louisell claimed that she stabbed Stilwell in self-defense after struggling for control of a knife, but she also took his wallet and tried to use his credit card at a mall before her arrest.

In a 1996 interview, Louisell said that abuse she suffered as a young child played a role in her crime. She also hedged her past claim that Stilwell tried to rape her.

"It had a lot more to do with my mental state than it had to do with his actions," Louisell told Des Moines Register reporter Thomas O'Donnell in the interview from prison. "Because of what I came out of I took him to be threatening, you know, to be almost trapping me in a way that was very familiar to me. I didn't have the sense to realize I could just get up and walk out of this situation."

None of Stilwell's family members was at Friday's parole board hearing.

## No early freedom

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan wrote the majority opinion in the 2012 ruling that deemed mandatory life-without-parole sentences unconstitutional for minors. She wrote that life sentences should only be used for the "rare juvenile whose crime reflects irreparable corruption."

In late January 2014, Story County District Court Judge James Ellefson sentenced Louisell to 25 years in prison — a move that would have allowed her to be free within days.

But the ruling was put on hold while the Iowa Supreme Court considered whether Ellefson had the authority to fashion a sentence that would release Louisell while bypassing the parole board. The seven justices unanimously overturned the lower judge's sentence last year, ruling that decisions about the release for most young killers should be left to the parole board.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, at least two other Iowa inmates sentenced as teens to life without parole have been released.

Kristina Fetters, who was imprisoned for killing her great-aunt, was released to a Des Moines hospice facility in 2013 after she was diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer. On May 12, the parole board granted work release to Mitchell Ronek, who was convicted of killing a man at a hotel in Maquoketa in 1984.

## Turbulent childhood

Louisell had a turbulent childhood growing up in a family scarred by divorce and her mother's mental illness, according to a history of her case written in the 2015 Iowa Supreme Court ruling. Louisell accidentally took LSD and experienced hallucinations when she was only 3 years old after finding the drug in her home.

In Friday's interview with the board, Louisell said a major factor in her crime was letting her life spiral out of control without asking for help. Prison psychologists and others helping her prepare to leave prison have taught her to set aside her own independence, she said.

"I'm a very independent person, but I know that not asking for help is a huge part of what led me down the path to committing my crime," she said. "If I have any problems, they get dealt with at the first opportunity."

Louisell is active in Women at the Well, a prison ministry at Mitchellville coordinated through the United Methodist Church. Finding and becoming active in a church would be one of her first priorities upon leaving prison, she said.

Louisell and Allen asked the parole board to consider granting a full parole Friday, under the condition that she move into the Butterfly Freedom House, a faith-based transitional home in Ames. But, Hodges and other board members each said they preferred a more gradual release.

Louisell will be eligible for full parole at the recommendation of her parole supervisor.