

**Statement of Dwayne White**  
**Before the United States Sentencing Commission**  
**Public Hearing on Proposed Amendments to Compassionate Release Policy Statement**  
**February 23, 2023**

My name is Dwayne White and I am 35 years old. Compassionate release changed my life and my family's life, and I want to spread stories of hope like my own. I'm so lucky to be back home thanks to my Judge and my attorney Erica and her team of law students. My wish is for more lives to be changed through compassionate release.

I live in Zion, Illinois with my aunt and uncle. Since my release from federal prison in 2021, I have been working at a medical supply company, doing everything I can to support my 12-year-old daughter Diera, taking care of my mom, spending time with my loved ones, and just enjoying my freedom. I am also employed with the city of Waukegan's Gun Violence Prevention Initiative. We work with local pastors, retired police officers, and good men from the streets who have changed their lives. We go out into the community and work with the youth to try to prevent some of the senseless violence.

I don't take a second of my freedom for granted. I missed out on so much when I was in prison. I learned my girlfriend was pregnant two weeks after my arrest. I missed out on everything from our home pregnancy test to my daughter's birth, my daughter's first steps, her first day of school, and first vacation. I missed all of the big and little milestones in her life until she was 11 ½ years old. I missed other milestones too—my father's cancer fight, my grandfather's and little brother's funerals, and many more. Today, my day to day life is all about work and family. I work a 12 hour graveyard shift four days a week. During the day I do things like watching my daughter cheerleading at her school. My daughter and I are best friends and huge foodies: our favorite thing to do is try new restaurants. We are also huge movie buffs, I'm always taking her to the theater for the next big show. Last month, I took my first vacation ever with my girlfriend.

So how did I end up in federal prison for 25 years? When I was 22 years old, I was arrested for being involved in a stash house robbery sting case. This is a crime that is made up by police. There aren't any real drugs and there isn't a real stash house.<sup>1</sup> My older brother Leslie (we consider each other brothers, even though we're not blood) brought me into the case. I had always trusted him and known him to have good judgment, so when he called me and told me he needed me, I had no reason to doubt him. He told me that I should just follow his lead and that his "homie" (who ended up being an undercover agent) would tell me what was going on. I knew something wasn't right, but I didn't know fully what was going on. The first time I heard the words "stash house robbery" was right before the undercover agent asked me if I was ready to go. I felt like I had to follow Leslie's lead and go with it. Right after that, we were all arrested.

My arrest was a shock, especially after I learned the full story of what happened. I could not believe my life took this turn so quickly. I had just been eating dinner with my family and laughing with my girlfriend on the couch. My girlfriend and I had planned to see Final

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<sup>1</sup> If you are interested in knowing more about stash house stings, this article discusses them: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/criminal-justice/ct-stash-house-defendants-compassionate-release-20210305-qiwa4codkzabhsalorsns35ae-story.html>.

Destination later that night at 8 pm, and ironically that was exactly when we were apprehended. I remember thinking over and over that I was so stupid to have agreed to go with Leslie. I will regret that decision for the rest of my life and I am truly sorry for what I did. I have paid dearly for my bad decisions and my family has too.

After my arrest, I sat in jail and didn't know what to do. When the prosecutors made me a 15-year plea offer, I was broken. It felt unreal, like space-age time. Just 15 years ago, I was a little kid. For me to fully understand a 15-year time gap was soul-crushing. I knew what that meant to me as a soon-to-be first-time father, and to my daughter who would be fatherless throughout her childhood and into her teens. I'd never see her learn to walk or talk or be a kid. I grew up without a father myself and I couldn't agree to that with my daughter on the way. So I went to trial, was convicted, and sentenced to 25 years, just as my attorney had predicted.

I was sentenced on Thursday, April 28, 2010. This just so happened to be my daughter's first birthday. This was a heck of a first birthday present to give my child. I will never forget how broken I felt. I used to sit on the bunk alone during months-long lockdowns, torturing myself over the missed milestones in my daughter's life, balancing each with another that I would be released in time to see. Though my sentence was devastating, my family reacted with support, love, and hope. They provided me encouragement and understanding when I thought I was cooked. Even so, I was hopeless and saw no end to what was ahead.

I tried everything from habeas to appeals to challenge my conviction. When Leslie, my co-defendant, won his appeal, I tried to adopt his motion but was denied. I filed for reconsideration but was also denied. It felt like the system was working against me. How could they realize error with Leslie's case and not me and our two co-defendants? When we found out that Leslie had gotten out, my family was very upset. How could he be out and not me?

Being locked up for so long was tough to say the least. Imagine isolation: no hugs nor human contact. I could count on one hand how many hugs I got each year. I was completely removed from any emotional outlet. In prison you're ridiculed for having sentimental or soft feelings and you're punished for having anger or rage. You must keep your emotions bottled up inside. I only cried once the entire time inside: when my brother was killed in an act of senseless gun violence. I was inconsolable for two weeks. My brother was like a father to my daughter since I couldn't be there for her in person. Having him ripped away from her, and me not being there for her to lean on, broke my heart. It hurt when my family came to visit me, and they returned to their reality, while I returned to mine. Knowing at least six months would go by without seeing them again was heart-wrenching. The lack of freedom also made me grow numb. I knew I'd be dealing with this life for the next umpteenth years

I once read, "Every adversity contains the seed of benefit." I knew I had to use my time inside to become a better man, a better boyfriend, and an excellent father. Everyone has the opportunity to do good, no matter what happened in the past. Once I shifted my mindset, everything changed. My heart changed, my mind changed, the way I viewed life changed. I realized what I felt I needed, was just a want. At the end of the day, I had only one need: family. I knew it was time to be the man they deserved. I witnessed other men in prison lose their families and turn against the world. I wanted to be a positive person and a light in the darkness. Mentors kept me on the right

path, telling me to support my friends, as my encouraging words kept them going. I knew this positivity benefitted my perspective. I wanted to take full advantage of my freedom as soon as I received the chance.

My opportunity struck in March 2020 when I got a letter from Erica Zunkel, a University of Chicago law professor. While I ignored the mail for days, my CO and cellmate convinced me to open the letter that ultimately changed my life forever. Erica and her students offered to try to help me get out of prison. That second, I knew I was coming home. The five- to ten-minute-long calls from home were never enough, and soon I would be able to see my family without limits.

The judge released me on August 6, 2021, when I was 34 years old and my daughter Diera was 11. It was unreal. I was in lockdown, only allowed out for a single hour three times a week. Within that one hour, we had to take our showers, make our calls, return our emails, clean our cells, and check our mail. I'll never forget it was a Friday. I had just taken a shower and called my brother. He told me I was coming home. A CO came into my cell and told me she needed a home address to process me right now. I knew it was real when she opened the door to let me call home. I had ten years left on a 25-year sentence. It was like God took my life away, then gave it back, in the blink of an eye. It was indescribable. I felt like the sun was shining on me and I was a walking blessing.

If I had served my full sentence, I would have been 44 years old and Diera would have been 22 years old upon my release. I know my mother would not be here anymore and the final years of her life would have been taken from me. I would have missed my daughter's 8th grade graduation to high school graduation and the first few college years. I would never have enjoyed the opportunity to establish myself financially before the age of 40. I would have missed ten more years of precious life.

Now, I can live. I have strengthened my relationships with my daughter and mother, and finally feel I have fulfilled my role as a fantastic father and supportive son. I am taking the time to get to know my daughter as an individual, learning her interests, wants, and needs. I was able to take her to her first day of school for the first time ever. My mother is elderly and needs me as well. As her health declines, I'm there for her in every way possible: taking out the trash, washing her clothes (even if she's picky about the folding!), hanging pictures on the wall, and more. My gratitude for these small moments is never-ending, as my presence benefits my loved ones.

My future is promising and full of opportunity. My ten year career goal is to own my own business. I just started classes to get my Commercial Driver's License. I see myself owning my own rig and starting my own trucking company in the next 5-8 years. I wrote a few books while inside and I want to send my manuscripts out to the Writer's Guild of America. I would love to see what I can turn my writing career into by potentially publishing or even converting into a screenplay. The possibilities are endless for my accomplishments now that I am home.

I am also a productive member of society. Working for MedLine, a medical company, I ship medical products directly to hospitals. While my mother was in the hospital, the nurse told me that the product she used came straight from my warehouse. This full circle moment meant the world to me: my labor was part of the process of improving my mother's health. My work is not

the only investment I've made in myself: I am learning about the stock market and building my personal credit. My positivity is the greatest gift I have ever been given, and I treat every day as a chance to be example for my family and friends.

Erica and her students' efforts changed my life, but not everyone receives such a blessed opportunity. I'm so thankful that my Judge gave me a second chance at life. Were more men to be released, more families would change for the better. Life is so precious, and I will never take another day for granted. Thank you for taking the time to read my story and I am excited to talk to you in person.