

No Way Out: Michigan's parole board redefines the meaning of "life"

Philandius Ford, 113879

Parole eligible since 1983

Died in prison Feb. 22, 2005

Although he was trusted by prison staff to spend years working in the community, often unsupervised, at age 56 the parole board still considered Ford too big a risk to release because of his prior record.

Philandius "Phil" Ford had traveled far from his troubled youth. He was a behavioral problem in school as early as second grade. Beginning at eight years old, when his parents couldn't handle him, he was placed in a series of foster homes. At age 14 he was sent to Boys' Training School in Lansing. At 17, Ford was sent to prison for larceny from a motor vehicle; he had just turned 20 when he was paroled in December 1967.

Over the next three years Ford was arrested many times for minor crimes and ordinance violations. When he was 23, he was sent to prison a second time for carrying a knife and receiving stolen property. He was released on parole in March 1973.



Philandius Ford

Two months later Ford was charged with felony-murder for a killing at a drug house in Detroit. Although the prosecution theory was that a robbery occurred, the jury found none and convicted Ford of second-degree murder.

Ford said he began to feel himself change when he entered prison for the third time. He was soon housed in the honor block at the Ionia Reformatory where he remained for eight years. During

that time he received excellent work reports and had only one misconduct citation.

According to Ford's 1982 Lifer Review Report:

Numerous prison staff believe that Phil Ford has come a long way and is doing a good job preparing himself for his release.

His 1983 report said:

Ford is a quiet individual that not only causes no problems, but helps maintain order in others through personal influence. He is a stable, mature person who takes great pride in his work.

And in 1985, auto shop instructor Bill Wieczorek wrote:

In [Phil Ford's] case "rehabilitation" has taken place. To delay his release any longer . . . would serve no purpose other than to punish him. He has learned from his past mistakes and is now ready to start a new life.

Ford was transferred to minimum custody in 1983. Under then-prevailing MDOC policy, prisoners who proved themselves trustworthy were given positions of responsibility and allowed to work in the community. Ford served as foreman of the groundskeeping crew and supervised a dozen other prisoners. Head Groundskeeper Richard Muscott wrote:

He is as valuable to this assignment as another fulltime employee would be, and will be next to impossible to replace with an inmate that has his capability. During my 25 years with the Department of Corrections I have had several thousand inmates working under my direct supervision and I would rate this man in the top five . . .

Ford also drove inmate crews to and from their

No Way Out: Michigan's parole board redefines the meaning of "life"

assignments in the community. He was responsible for snowplowing around two prison facilities and was sometimes out on the job all night, unsupervised. He was foreman of a prisoner crew at the Ionia Free Fair for three summers.

At his request, Ford was transferred to the camp program in 1986. He was a driver at Camp Ojibway — transporting prisoners to facilities around the state and making supply runs for the camp. He was then sent to Camp Waterloo. While there, he worked at St. Louis Center and St. Joseph Hall in Chelsea, doing maintenance and groundskeeping. He also worked for a year on a major building project for Rampy Construction Company. In 1986 and 1987 Ford went home on unescorted furloughs — for the funerals of his brother and mother. After almost six years in minimum custody, he was sent back to a secure prison in 1989 because a departmental policy change removed all lifers from community status.

Although he lost several close family members, including his first wife who died of cancer in 1990, Ford maintained family ties. He married Nancy Dillard in 1992.

Ford had four parole interviews during the '80s. Each time the interviewing board member was impressed with his maturity, sincerity, and accomplishments, but the full board never took action to release him. In 1991, although the board member who saw him found “no indication of the lifestyle that brought him to prison,” the full board still decided it had “no interest” in paroling him. It recommended psychotherapy “for the experience.” In 1992, after ten sessions, Psychologist James Dickson noted that Ford’s reaction to family deaths showed, “a great deal of maturity and behavioral control.” Dickson continued:

during his incarceration and has successfully met it . . . Mr. Ford acts as a healthy role model for other inmates to follow, intervenes in disputes at his discretion, and prides himself on maintaining a cool head. Other inmates reportedly seek him out for advice, which is to his credit.

In 1993, after serving 20 years, Ford wrote then parole board chair Gary Gabry asking what he could do to improve his chances for parole. Gabry answered:

The Board's concern is your lengthy criminal history and this will continue to be of concern every time your case is reviewed. About the only thing you can do is maintain a positive institutional record.

Ford did as advised, but the parole board continued him again after a 1997 interview. In 2002 it sent him a “no interest” notice after simply reviewing his file. Ford was scheduled to be considered again in 2007. However, on Feb. 22, 2005, he died of an apparent heart attack at age 57.