

Ruth Bullock, 195075

Parole eligible since 1998

Died in prison Feb. 11, 2004

Aging and ill, Bullock had hoped a Supreme Court decision making her life sentence for drug possession parolable would lead to release. But even after 16 years the parole board never chose to act.

In February 1988, Ruth Bullock picked up Kenneth Hasson at the Lansing airport. He placed luggage in her trunk containing over 15 kilograms of cocaine. Although Bullock denied knowledge of the drugs, a Clinton County jury convicted her of possessing more than 650 grams based on traces of cocaine found in her purse and glove compartment. She also had several thousand dollars in cash. At the time, the offense carried a mandatory penalty of life in prison without the possibility of parole.



Ruth Bullock

When she was arrested, Bullock was a 48-year-old grandmother. She had been married for 23 years and had worked for General Motors for 16. Her prior record consisted of three misdemeanors for drunkenness, gambling and driving on a suspended license when she was 20.

In 1992, the Michigan Supreme Court issued an opinion in Bullock's case. The Court held that a mandatory sentence of life without parole for possessing (as opposed to distributing) drugs violated the state constitutional ban on cruel or unusual punishment. Its solution was to make Bullock and

all other prisoners serving life sentences for possession eligible for parole after serving 10 years.

The parole board saw Bullock briefly in 1992, after her sentence was changed, but she did not become eligible for parole until July 1998. The board chose not to release her then, notifying her instead that she would be interviewed again in July 2003. Bullock described the experience:

When I was first seen by the Parole Board, the lady told me that everything looks good for you Ms. Bullock, within the next five years you should be going home, try not to bring us no tickets, and you should be going home. I sat here and counted the days believing that I would be going home in five years. All I could do was wait. When they saw me the second time, I saw no reason why I couldn't go after my ten years... They do not give you any reason why they come to that decision. When I got my decision from the parole board, I could not think, I had built my hopes up too high. I could not believe what had happened. They did not tell me that I walked on the wrong side of the ground or anything, just no interest.

When Bullock entered prison she was an insulin-dependent diabetic. Over the years, her health deteriorated dramatically. In 2000, Bullock wrote:

I am now 59 years old. I am Diabetic. I have Kidney Failure, Seizures, High Blood Pressure and a Brain Tumor. I take approximately 15 medications a day, and I am put on a Kidney machine about every other day. I have been Blind in my left eye for about eight years...All of my time is dedicated to taking care of my health problems and basic hygiene. I am unable to participate in any of the activities or programs within the institution. I have a few friends that assist me in getting my food tray

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from the chow hall while I am on the Kidney machine.

The board did see Bullock again in July 2003, when she was 63. By then, the Michigan Legislature had completely overhauled the drug laws, eliminating mandatory sentences and applying sentencing guidelines instead. Under the new laws, given her minimal prior record, the trial judge would have been able to sentence Bullock to a minimum term as low as nine years. In November, when she had still received no decision, Bullock wrote in a letter:

I saw the board on July 14th. As far as I know there is no reason for them keeping me. They ask me questions about being at a gambling party & getting a \$5.00 drunk driving ticket 40 years ago, but I don't remember that and he seem to have a problem with me not remembering it but I don't remember. I can't see why they would keep me here for that. I've already served 15½ years and a little over. I need help real bad. You know these people could have let me go after 10 yrs. I'm old & sick. I really want to go home.

Bullock never got home. In late January 2004, pressure from the tumor caused blood vessels in her brain to burst. Multiple surgeries performed at University of Michigan Hospital were not enough to save her. Bullock died on February 11, 2004, never having received another decision from the parole board.