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ALERT FEATURED

South Boston man granted partial pardon

From staff reports Jan 3, 2022



Jesse James Dunaway Jr.

Gov. Ralph Northam has granted a partial pardon to a South Boston man serving a life sentence under the drug kingpin statue.

It was on March 22, 2006, that a Halifax County Circuit Court jury convicted Jesse James Dunaway Jr. of operating a criminal enterprise. He's the only person in Virginia to be prosecuted and convicted of the "Kingpin" statute.

The jury deliberated for an hour before finding the then 25-year-old guilty of being a "principal, or one of several principal administrators, organizer or leader of a continuing criminal enterprise which sold or possessed the intent to sell at least five kilograms of a mixture containing cocaine base," the indictment against him read.

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He was given life in prison plus one year and six months.

"Jesse was sentenced to a mandatory life sentence despite his behavior being no different than other drug dealers," Lisa Spees, the director of Virginians for Judicial Reform, told The Gazette on Sunday morning.

She said the guidelines called for a sentence of five to eight years.

"The Continuing Criminal Enterprise law is intended for Virginia's most serious drug dealers and the jury found that the defendant fell into that category," Brendan U. Dunning, Halifax County assistant commonwealth attorney and regional drug prosecutor, said in the March 24, 2006, edition of The Gazette-Virginian.

He was arrested on Dec. 2, 2004, when the South Boston Police Department executed a search warrant on a College Street home, The Gazette reported in 2006.

There were about 100 exhibits entered into evidence and 15 witnesses testified during the trial.

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Over the years, many advocacy groups joined in the rally seeking clemency. A change.org petition was signed by 6,653 people.

"Jesse has served 17 years in prison," Spees said. "He works approximately 55 hours per week and has done everything in his power to help others and make amends."

Dunaway had filed a petition seeking clemency and requested a conditional pardon.

Last month, Northam granted it and reduced his sentence time served effective June 1, 2025.

"We are so pleased that Governor Northam saw fit to give Jesse a second chance at life," Spees said in an email. "Jesse plans to continue advocating for others when he is released."

The pardon comes with conditions including that he complete a re-entry program, submit to the Virginia Parole Board home plan and is supervised by the parole board for three years after release.

"I am not the same person that came to prison in 2004," a message from Dunaway states on chang.org. "I just want the second chance to do what is right and to make a difference."

He said prison has fueled him with a "deep desire to be a productive man and a good father."

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