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Freddie Nole has helped scores of people when they are released from prison and need a ride home. (Caroline Gutman for The Washington Post)

For those who can't find anyone to pick them up from prison, John "Freddie" Nole is their ride. He knows many of them may wind up back there.

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By [William Wan](#)

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NORRISTOWN, PA.

As he waited outside the razor wire next to the prison gate, John "Freddie" Nole struggled for the right words to say to the man who would soon be walking out.

It had been five years since Nole came out those same prison doors. He remembered the gleaming plans he had back then. He'd rent a place of his own. Reconnect with family. Revel in the pride that comes with a paycheck and a purpose.

It all seemed naive now, looking back. "I didn't have a clue," said Nole, 72, shaking his head.

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He kept a stack of rejection letters on his kitchen table from all the jobs he'd tried to get in recent months and failed. Bathroom cleaner and janitor at Walmart. Late-night cook at Arby's. Dishwasher at LongHorn Steakhouse. Shelf stocker at Target.

Managers unfailingly loved his attitude. Then — as always — came the background check and email. "Unfortunately, we have decided to move forward with other candidates ..."

At loss for a purpose, two years ago, he started picking up other prisoners on the day they were released. He put out the word to friends on the inside. He persuaded guards to put up notices in prisons across Pennsylvania.

Anyone who didn't have family or friends to get them — he'd be their ride.

That was how Nole found himself on a scorching day in May returning to the prison system he'd hated and spent 49 years trying to leave. Nole knew little about the man being released that day. All he had was a letter sent weeks earlier by the prisoner, Franklin Hons.

"I need all the help I can get from you's," Hons wrote to Nole. He asked for a ride to his hometown, Scranton, two hours away. He also begged Nole to secure for him a TV, VCR, sofa and stereo.

On the drive to the prison that morning, Nole and a friend — a minister named William Jones — debated how best to help Hons.

"This long list of stuff he wants — I'm worried," said Nole, holding Hons's letter in the passenger seat. "He's thinking too grandiose. He needs to be focusing on the basics. Getting a place to sleep. How to find a job. How to stay off the streets and out of jail."

The pastor nodded. Jones had worked in prison ministry for 34 years. He first met Nole during the five decades Nole spent locked up. Now free, Nole still couldn't afford car insurance, so the pastor had offered his for the prison pickups.

Between the pastor and a handful of other drivers Nole had recruited, they had picked up 42 prisoners in less than two years. Hons would be No. 43.

More than 600,000 people are released from America's prisons every year, vowing never to go back. Yet more than 60 percent are rearrested within three years, studies show. More than 80 percent within 10 years.

Politicians, especially in election years, often focus on punishment — depicting havoc in cities and the need to put away those perpetuating it. Polls show that even as violent-crime rates are dropping, Americans feel that crime and criminals are getting worse.

Prisoner advocates argue that the system is rigged against people who were once incarcerated. They struggle to find anyone willing to rent them a home. They often find it difficult to find work and a way to escape the poverty, conditions and drugs that landed them behind bars

Back and forth the pendulum has swung. Tough on crime. Pushes for more lenient, rehabilitation-focused policies. Meanwhile, from his perch waiting at the prison gate, Nole has watched those walking out caught by a pendulum of their own: between hope and despair.

He'd seen guys come out — without the plans or belief needed to pull their lives together — and end up back in prison within weeks. He'd also seen those with the biggest ambitions lose hope after running into bitter reality.

All of that was on Nole's mind on the morning he and the pastor arrived at Nole's old state prison — a 3,830-bed maximum-security complex outside Philadelphia called SCI Phoenix. In the car, Nole wondered aloud how much they should warn Hons, the man coming out, of the uphill battles he faced.

The pastor pointed to the Bible verse engraved on a silver cross hanging from his rearview mirror: *We love because He first loved us.*

“We just got to show him love,” he said. “I mean that’s really all we have.”

While the pastor parked the car in the prison lot, Nole walked past the familiar cement walls to a heavy outer door. “A lot of memories here,” Nole said quietly. “Like coming home.”

With a wrenching metallic sound, the doors opened. And out walked a bearded man with long hair. In one hand, he clutched a white plastic bag. In the other, he held a stack of papers and notebooks.

“Franklin Hons?” Nole asked.

The man — formerly known as inmate QMO091 — nodded.

Hons was wearing a rough-cut, maroon uniform issued by the prison. It reminded Nole of his own release day and how he ate his first meal at a restaurant in prison clothes. He could still remember the searing looks he got from other customers, the shame and hurt as he choked down his food.

Nole squinted at Hons, sizing him up.

“I don’t know if they’ll all fit,” he said as he popped open the car trunk, “but we got some clothes for you.”

## A \$12 life sentence

Nole was 17 when he first entered Pennsylvania state prisons. By the time he walked out, he was 67.

He had grown up in South Philadelphia’s poorest neighborhoods with 11 siblings, surrounded by drinking and gambling. At age 8, he was sent to juvenile hall — the first of many stints for petty theft and truancy. He joined a street gang and cracked open parking meters for quarters.

He was 17 on Feb. 22, 1969, when he and two teens decided to steal from a candy store. Armed with a toy gun, they snatched money from the change box and ran, Nole said.

It wasn’t until later that they learned the owner — an 81-year-old Polish immigrant named Joseph Shayka — had died of an aneurysm in his abdominal aorta, according to court records and news accounts.

The two other teenagers spent 18 months and 11 months locked up. But Nole was charged as an adult.

Authorities said Nole poked the gun into the store owner's stomach, contributing to his death. Nole's prosecutor was a young, aggressive assistant district attorney named Lynne Abraham. Decades later she would be called the "Queen of Death" by local media and "The Deadliest D.A." by the New York Times for seeking death penalties more than any other prosecutor in America.

Nole said he didn't strike the owner. But the prosecutor described the teen as "a vicious monster" who set out to kill the store owner for \$12 in change. It took the jury two hours to convict, according to local news accounts, and just seven minutes to arrive at the penalty of life in prison.

Nole was released in 2019, a few years after the U.S. Supreme Court decreed that life sentences for children and teens amounted to cruel and unusual punishment.

But after five decades inside, his body still behaved as if it were in prison. It forced him awake daily at 5 a.m. He still caught himself calling the bedroom his "cell," and a bowl and plates his "tray." Even after his nieces spent weeks teaching him to use a smartphone, he got overwhelmed by its apps and struggled to make a single call.

But prison also taught him to survive.

Old heads on his cellblock had mentored him. They showed him he had value and something to offer others.

In prison, he got his high school diploma and learned enough about the law to file appeals. While inside, he won a Spirit of Philadelphia Award for creating a center where imprisoned men could play with their visiting children. He filled the space with books, paintbrushes and games.

But the most precious thing prison gave him: It was there he met his wife, Susan Beard-Nole, a volunteer from a local church. They married in 1984 in the sparse visiting room — not knowing, because of Nole's life sentence, whether they would ever truly be together.

"I lost three brothers and two sisters while in prison. I missed every funeral, wedding, graduation," he said. "It's hard to explain, though, to people that I don't feel like I wasted my life. Yes, I did wrong. And things were done to me that I felt were wrong. But all you have is what's in front of you."

## 'Anything you want'

Upon release, some men were eager to chat. Others were quiet and wary, distrustful that anyone would help without wanting something in return.

Nole always made food the first order of business — giving them their first taste of freedom after years of having to swallow what others forced on them.

"Order anything you want, Frank," Nole urged Hons as they sat down at a local diner.

Nole ordered bacon and eggs. The pastor asked for an omelet. But Hons shook his head.

“Not hungry,” he told the waitress. “Just get me a black coffee.”

It wasn't until after Hons went to change in the diner bathroom that he began to open up. He returned in jeans and a red flannel shirt and took a long sip of the coffee.

“I couldn't throw away them old clothes fast enough,” Hons said. He told Nole and the pastor he hadn't slept a wink the night before. “I kept thinking about what I'd do when I got out.”

He showed them drawings in his notebook. There were sketches for a log cabin he planned to build on an Arizona ranch owned by his aging father. A new home for his new life.

But because of his parole terms, he said, he'd have to stay in Scranton for at least another year.

“The thing I got to worry about is staying away from the old crowd,” said Hons. “I'm 55 and been locked up four times already. If I start hanging around the same people, I'm gonna get dragged right back down.”

Last time he was free, it was a fight that got him sent back, he said.

“My ex-wife's sister — her boyfriend was beating her up. She called me to come get her,” Hons said. When Hons arrived, the two were still yelling. Amid the argument, Hons said, a buck knife he used for hunting fell out of its case.

“The other guy said, ‘Oh, you're gonna pull a knife on me,’” he recalled. So, Hons said, he threw the knife away as police arrived.

Hons was found guilty of assault and tampering with evidence, according to court records. Officers said they saw Hons threaten another man with a knife, then hide it between a cement wall and a tree.

“I turned a simple assault charge into something much worse. An 18-month sentence into four years,” Hons said. “I know better now. If I ever try to break up a fight again, better believe I'm taking a cop with me.”

“That's good, Frank,” the pastor said, slapping him on the shoulder. “You're learning.”

Hons said he'd been worried lately about a new argument brewing — one he feared could get him arrested again.

Two weeks earlier, his girlfriend had called and said she wanted to see him when he got out. But she let slip in the call that there was another man staying with her at the motel where she lived. For days, the call left Hons seething.

“I decided that I'm not going there,” Hons said. “It's a fight just waiting to happen.”

Nole nodded. With Hons finally opening up, he didn't want to lecture him or seem judgmental. So all he said was "Good choice, Frank."

Nole paid the waitress, and the three men piled into the car. While the pastor drove, Nole and Hons made small talk in the back about the different cellblocks they'd lived in. Hons recounted how he had given up alcohol while locked up and how hard it had been to stay away from prison hooch and drugs.

Half an hour into the drive, Hons's thoughts returned to the girlfriend and her last call.

"She's telling me they're best friends and nothing's going on," he said from the back seat. "But anyone knows — if you got another man in a hotel with you, taking you everywhere — c'mon, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out."

Hons had asked Nole to drive him to a friend's house in Scranton. But now, he was going over their route. They'd be passing right by the motel, Hons noted. The one where his girlfriend was waiting.

A quick stop. It would be so easy.

## 'Insufficient funds'

Nole told Hons they weren't able to get the TV, VCR, sofa or stereo he'd asked for. But they had enough money for a few essentials if he wanted to stop at Walmart.

Hons nodded. "I need a wallet."

He pulled out a debit card that the prison had given him upon release. On it was \$159, earned from four years of prison labor. That now constituted his life savings and would need to get him through the next month.

"Be careful," Nole warned. "Every time you use it, the bank's gonna take a heavy fee."

They decided to take all the money out in one transaction at Walmart. But huddling over an ATM near the entrance, the two men couldn't figure out how. The machine was new and unfamiliar to both of them.

"Insufficient funds," it read at first.

Then: "Indispensable amount."

After 17 minutes, they realized that the ATM dispensed cash only in \$20 increments.

In the men's aisles, they found a wallet (\$14). They grabbed a belt (\$12) to match the dress pants Nole had given Hons for job interviews, and a phone with a prepaid one-month plan (\$84).

Nole had forged a partnership with a nonprofit for his pickups and was starting to get donations from churches and prison ministries. There was no pay in it for Nole — only enough money for gas, food and a few clothes for the men he picked up.

His most surprising donation had come just weeks earlier when Nole had returned to his old prison as a guest speaker for men with life sentences.

The lifers surprised him with a \$1,000 check for his cause — money painstakingly collected from prison jobs that paid as little as 25 cents an hour. They told Nole they were proud of him.

Of all the people in his new life — the neighbors on his block who knew nothing of his prison record, and the prospective employers who seemed to know it all too well — his old friends from inside were the only ones who understood everything he'd been through, he said.

"You got everything you need?" Nole asked Hons as they headed to checkout.

What Nole didn't tell Hons was that he'd interviewed at that same Walmart months earlier for a janitorial job. The store manager that day — a young woman with a cheery smile — told him, "We could really use someone like you."

She asked him how soon he could start and which night shifts might work best. The only thing missing, she said, was a background check.

It took Nole a month and several calls to learn in an email that the store had decided to go with "more qualified candidates."

The rejections often angered Nole's wife more than they did him. "How qualified do you need to be to clean a bathroom?" Beard-Nole would fume. "This is a man who has paid his debt to society. A man with so much to give. And no one will give him a chance."

During Nole's five decades in prison, he had learned to farm and deliver calves and give them shots for pink eye. He'd been a dental technician, making false teeth. He'd worked his way up to bookkeeper for his prison's correctional corporation, helping to tend its extensive prison-labor industry.

None of it mattered.

In job interviews, he usually told managers up front about his criminal sentence. It was awkward, finding a way to bring it up and watching them struggle to respond.

"Each interview feels like getting tried all over again," he said.

He worried about being a burden to his wife, a retired computer programmer. It had taken them months to find someone willing to rent them a home in Norristown. And they'd paid tens of thousands they couldn't afford in medical expenses for Nole's ailing body and broken, cavity-riddled teeth.

“To get out and not be able to contribute. That’s not being a man, a real husband,” Nole said.

Two days before picking up Hons, Nole applied for a job at Lowe’s. Within hours, the store called him back. The manager wanted Nole to come in the following week for an interview. Nole spent the entire next day trying not to feel nervous.

But he mentioned none of this to Hons as they walked out of Walmart and into the parking lot.

“Let’s get out of here,” Nole said. “We gotta get you home.”

## ‘Keep going straight’

As their car entered the city limits of Scranton, Hons’s plans seemed to change.

He had given them the address for a friend’s apartment — where he planned to crash for the weekend. On Monday, he said, he planned to meet with his parole officer, then find a more permanent place to stay.

But when the GPS app on the pastor’s phone said to turn right, Hons told the pastor to ignore it.

“They’re taking you through back roads that’ll take forever,” he said. “Keep going straight.”

Make a U-turn, the pastor’s phone said at the next intersection.

“Go straight. Trust me, it’ll take us right there,” Hons insisted.

As they neared downtown, Hons told Nole and the pastor that they could drop him off at the courthouse. His buddy’s house was a block from there, he said, and he could walk.

“We can take you all the way, though. You got all these bags,” Nole said, pointing to the two Walmart bags and another one full of donated clothes his wife had packed for Hons. “Please, we can take you there.”

“Nah, I need a cigarette anyway. That way you guys can get going on your long drive back,” Hons said. “Drop me off at that corner.”

The pastor pulled over. Nole helped Hons move his bags onto the street across from the courthouse, just outside an empty bar still closed for the afternoon.

“All right, man, sorry we couldn’t take you the whole distance,” Nole said, shaking Hons’s hand. “But if you’re all right, we’re all right.”

“Thanks,” Hons said. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “I’m all right.”



Nole eased back into the pastor's car, then thought of one last thing he wanted to say. He rolled down the window. "Welcome back, Frank."

Nole and the pastor were quiet as they drove away.

Finally, the pastor said, "It bothers me a little that he didn't want us to drop him off."

"Yeah," Nole sighed. "I don't think he was going to his friend's house."

Nole asked the pastor if they should have confronted Hons about the address and GPS directions.

"I worry if the reason he pulled over was for a drink or for drugs," Nole said. "I wonder if he isn't headed back to that motel. To the ex-girlfriend and the guy she's with."

As they drove, Nole thought about the interview he had next week with the store manager at Lowe's. He thought about a pile of prison letters waiting for him on his couch. More men asking for help and a ride to their new life.

"He's gonna get enough suspicion and doubt from everyone else now that he's out," Nole decided. "He needs a lot, but he didn't need that from us."

*Razzan Nakhlawi and Aaron Schaffer contributed to this report.*