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Coronavirus Provides Way Out for Florida Inmate

After 32 years behind bars, Rufus Rochell gains release as prison officials aim to prevent outbreaks



Rufus Rochell and his sister Cheryl Bolen, at whose house he will be serving the rest of his sentence.

PHOTO: ANTOINETTE NEWSOME

By *Sadie Gurman*

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Rufus Rochell, behind bars for 32 years for a drug conviction, was released from federal prison Friday morning as part of an effort to protect inmates from the coronavirus sweeping through the nation's lockups.

For Mr. Rochell, it took a global pandemic to accomplish what years of advocacy could not. He unsuccessfully sought clemency under President

Obama, and watched as President Trump last year pardoned former media mogul Conrad Black, who befriended Mr. Rochell in prison and supported his release.

Prison officials this month said Mr. Rochell could serve the rest of his sentence at his sister's house outside Gainesville, Fla., attached to an ankle monitor, as part of [a challenging process](#) designed to ease crowding and slow the virus's spread.

After weeks of quarantine inside FCI Coleman Medium in Sumterville, Fla., Mr. Rochell on Friday greeted his daughter in the parking lot, wearing a mask for protection and wheeling a small cart of belongings behind him. It was the first time they had seen each other outside a prison setting.

"I knew within my heart that I was going to exit those doors and go home," Mr. Rochell, 68 years old, said in a phone interview from a Boston Market restaurant in Ocala, Fla., where he was enjoying his first post-prison meal, a chicken pot pie.

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Mr. Rochell, whose case captured the attention of prisoner-rights groups, fits the description of the kind of inmate who should be top on the list for early release, his supporters say. His offense was not violent, and his age puts him at higher risk of complications from the disease.





Rufus Rochell carted away some personal belongings after his release Friday.

PHOTO: ANTOINETTE NEWSOME

He was convicted of dealing cocaine in 1988, when there was bipartisan agreement in Washington that long mandatory minimum sentences helped reduce crime. Mr. Rochell, then 36, was sentenced to 35 years.

Congress has since undone many policies that filled prisons with nonviolent offenders, most recently through the First Step Act, [a criminal-justice overhaul](#) that President Trump signed into law in 2018. Mr. Rochell

sought release through that law last year, writing to a judge himself in blue ink on notebook paper.

In his three decades behind bars, Mr. Rochell became involved in prison ministry and worked to support fellow inmates, something he said he hoped to continue while confined to his sister's home. He also befriended Mr. Black, Mr. Trump's onetime business partner who was convicted of fraud and obstruction of justice and released in 2012. Mr. Trump pardoned him in May.

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“I knew and remember Rufus well; he is a decent, kindly, honest and immensely likable man, beloved in the residential unit where we both were,” Mr. Black wrote in a 2018 testimonial for the advocacy group Families Against Mandatory Minimums. He “should have been released many years ago,” Mr. Black wrote.

When the coronavirus [hit the federal prison system](#) last month, Mr. Rochell's daughter, Antoinette Newsome, 31, said she stayed awake wondering “What if i get this call and they said that my daddy didn't make it?” Across the federal prison system as of Friday, at least 620 inmates and 357 staff had tested positive; 25 inmates and an employee had died.

A few weeks ago, Mr. Rochell said prison staff asked him to sign some papers and told him “you're getting ready to get out of here.” He tested negative for Covid-19, his daughter said, and staff took his temperature and tested his oxygen levels upon release.

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The bureau declined to comment on the conditions of his release.

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The bureau said it had begun placing at least 1,501 prisoners on home confinement since Attorney General William Barr [directed officials to release](#) inmates who are nonviolent, have shown good conduct behind bars and are considered unlikely to reoffend.

Inmates and their families have reported confusion about the process. The Justice Department has said [inmates could be considered](#) even if their time served was less than 50% of the sentence; but the bureau in court filings and internal memos said those who had served more time were still being prioritized.

When he was selected, Mr. Rochell said, inmates and staff congratulated him and shook his hand. He told them he would work to help them get out, too.

“Some guys are afraid this virus might hit them,” he said. “They said, Rufus, don’t forget us, please don’t forget us, man, we know we can depend on you.”