

# After 31 years' time for \$62 theft, man out, hopeful

By Patrick Keating  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

MICHIGAN (NNPA) - When he was 23 years old, Ronald James Coleman-Bey, also known as James Robert Percy-Bey, stole \$62 from a bookstore by pretending his finger was a gun. He estimates the robbery lasted about 20 seconds.

Last month, just a few weeks shy of his 55th birthday, he was released on parole after 31 years in prison for that crime. Coleman-Bey was a parolable lifer, one of a class of prisoners serving life sentences for offenses less than first degree murder, and theoretically eligible for parole after serving a set number of years.

Now that he's out, Coleman-Bey hopes to find a job and re-start his life, with help from his wife, Judi Coleman-Bey. He said the most pressing matter is finding a job, but he's having a hard time getting a Social Security card with the name Coleman-Bey on it.

The Bey suffix has a religious connotation. He and his wife belong to a Muslim sect called Moorish Science of America. Adherents to that sect often add either "Bey" or "El" to their surnames.

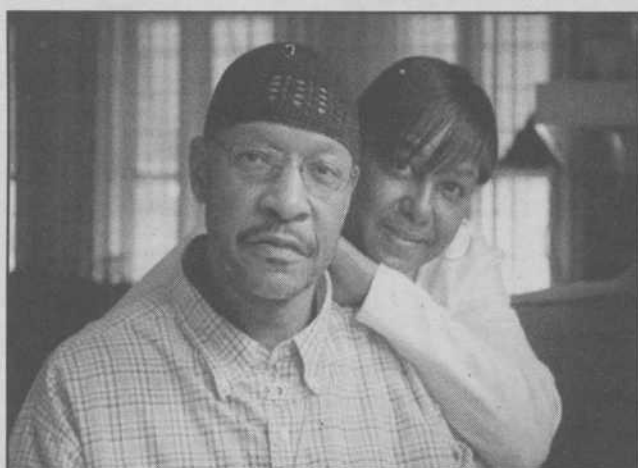
On Dec. 10, Coleman-Bey applied for General Assistance. He said being dependent and seeking aid from others was depressing and embarrassing.

Judi Coleman-Bey, who fought for years to secure his parole, added that, from her point of view, he is doing very well in terms of adjustment and that the hardest part is over. She emphasized that they would make it because their love has been tried and tested, and it is true.

Making it on the outside can oftentimes be an uphill battle, according to Russ Marlan, a Department of Corrections representative and former Detroit-based parole officer. He said the difficulties parolees face often depend on what type of support they have on the outside.

Coleman-Bey was fortunate in that he had a loving wife waiting for him. He is determined to stay out and not end up back in prison. According to Marlan, recidivism had been an ongoing problem, with about 48 percent of parolees returning to prison within four years of their release.

To help address that problem, the Department of Cor-



James Robert Percy-Bey is adjusting to life as a free man.

rections started a pilot, prisoner re-entry program three years ago. The goal was to better prepare prisoners to return to society. The program began with eight pilot sites, including Wayne County, and is now in 15 sites statewide with \$33 million in funding.

Different areas of the state have different issues, which is one reason the Department of Corrections lets each pilot site use money for the program in its own way. Marlan said one pilot site consists of a nine-county region around Traverse City. There, transportation is a major issue because of a lack of mass transit or individual cars for the parolees.

By contrast, in Benton Harbor, high unemployment is a major concern, while in Ann Arbor the issue is affordable housing.

The Corrections Department has made other changes to help improve parolees' chances of success. Marlan said prisoners are no longer paroled on a Friday or Saturday, leaving them unsupervised until sometime the following week when they would first report to their parole officer. Many prisoners often ended up violating terms of their paroles without someone to watch over them during those few days.

Not all parolees go through the prisoner re-entry program, however. Coleman-Bey didn't. He, his wife and Marlan agree it probably wasn't necessary in his case. Marlan added that the parole board picks who goes through the re-entry program, and that those who do are typically those who were paroled before and failed to stay out of trouble.

He also said the fact that the board granted Coleman-Bey parole in the first place indicates they felt recidivism was unlikely in his case. He said the board is generally very tough about granting paroles to prisoners serving life terms.

The issue of parolable lifers is central to CAPPS, the Citizens Alliance on Prisons & Public Spending, which argues that many of the older parolable lifers pose no threat to public safety and that keeping them incarcerated only adds to the taxpayers' burdens.

A CAPPS report available at the organization's website, www.Capps-mi.org, claims that each time a parolable lifer is denied release for another five years, it costs Michigan taxpayers a minimum of \$112,000. And, as the years pass, these costs to begin to include more medical care.

CAPPS Executive Director Barbara Levene said Coleman-Bey is representative of a much larger class of older inmates, adding that while they are pleased that he is out, the group hopes its advocacy work in general has been useful in raising consciousness about parole issues and in encouraging the parole board to look more closely at some of these cases.

The Department of Corrections normally paroles about 11,000 to 12,000 prisoners each year. Marlan said that in the last two years, 8,000 prisoners went through the prisoner release program, and that there has been about a 26 percent improvement in the recidivism rate. That equates to 400 fewer people coming back to prison — 400 people who are productive, taxpaying members of society.

"They've not come back to \$30,000 a year prison beds and, more importantly, have not gone out there and committed crimes," he said.

In each pilot site, a sort of "post-parole board" comprised of local people from the faith-based community, judges and representatives from the local prosecutor office, local law enforcement, Goodwill Industries and Michigan Works! These groups work with others who

understand the issues of prisoners returning home and help oversee the re-entry program and those who go through it.

Although Coleman-Bey was not paroled as part of the re-entry program, he can still sit down with his parole officer and discuss steps he can take and resources he can utilize to help get a job.

Marlan emphasized that the re-entry program is not about coddling prisoners; rather, it is about helping parolees — who would be coming home in any event — succeed in becoming produc-

tive, taxpaying members of society.

Above and beyond finding a job, Coleman-Bey would like to help out youngsters, try to keep them from making some of the same mistakes he made. He would tell them crime doesn't pay and that once they get into the system, it can do anything it wants with them.

"There's no glory in going to jail and having a number," he said. "A lot of youths out there, they glorify going to jail."

He added that prison is a slave environment.

While his wife is angry he spent so many years in prison, he is not. He admitted to being bitter years ago, but now he feels disappointment with himself. He said both his late brother and late father tried to instill positive values in him, but he was young, wild and wanted to do his own thing.

He also noted that the robbery was basically done on impulse, and that he had two checks from Chrysler in his pocket at that time.

He said, "It was foolish." Patrick Keating writes for the Michigan Chronicle.

## Your Horoscope Says... Feb. 6 - 13

### ARIES

You can help out a friend this week if you plan your schedule so that you've got time for kindness built in! Embrace your generous side while getting your own work finished. You are excellent at multi-tasking!

Soul Affirmation: Old love? New love? Most important is true love!

Lucky Numbers: 26, 38, 41

### TAURUS

You may want to make this week a schmooze-fest. Whether you go out to a party or stay in with a friend, you'll have a good time if you remember that charm is the only weapon that will work for you this week.

Soul Affirmation: I work hard to combat envy this week.

Lucky Numbers: 11, 29, 33

### GEMINI

Your vibrations could cause you to pause. That's good, because a pause is just what you need to remember to think of the positive. Reject the negative, and you'll have a wonderful week.

Soul Affirmation: I give my mind a holiday again this week.

Lucky Numbers: 10, 17, 32

### CANCER

Rev up your engines. This is a fine week for making progress with projects that you've got in the works. Your energy is high and your mind is clear. Use every advantage this week to finish up your work.

Soul Affirmation: What life has given me is sufficient to any task.

Lucky Numbers: 45, 47, 54

### LEO

A spirit of competition may be troubling you. Let it go. Celebrate differences and get on with the work of creating new hope in the world! Your tendency to speak without considering the full impact on others should be checked this week.

Soul Affirmation: I graciously anticipate joy, and this gives me the ability to give.

Lucky Numbers: 18, 19, 31

### VIRGO

Confusion exists over some question, and every time you think you've got the answer, circumstances will change and new information will come to your attention. Don't worry. Things are going to clear up and work out. Take it easy.

Soul Affirmation: My smile is a radiant light to those I encounter.

Lucky Numbers: 30, 35, 52

### LIBRA

Communications flow smoothly this week, and your word is golden. A wild idea for moneymaking could come to you, but you should let the strictly material walk on by. Stick to your current plan, and use your imagination for ways to streamline your work.

Soul Affirmation: Confusion gives me an opportunity to show my love.

Lucky Numbers: 13, 46, 48

### SCORPIO

Creative mental energy makes this a banner week. An ambition that you thought you had left behind years ago suddenly resurfaces, and you'll see similarities between what you are doing now and what you dreamed of back then.

Soul Affirmation: I give my brain full power this week.

Lucky Numbers: 12, 24, 43

### SAGITTARIUS

Educate those around you in the area of personal growth. Their improvement will bring benefits to you. Humor in communication is the key. Humor in introspection is a must.

Soul Affirmation: Success that has been following me is trying to catch up.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 8, 55

### CAPRICORN

This week romance is begins to percolate. Enjoy your feelings and let your brain relax. Suspend all judgments of others. Being stern won't work for you this week.

Soul Affirmation: I go along to get along.

Lucky Numbers: 1, 6, 22

### AQUARIUS

Romance will find you this week. Don't be looking the other way. Your "rap" is especially strong. Make as many of those important phone calls as possible. Believe in others as strongly as you should believe in yourself.

Soul Affirmation: Friendships are shock absorbers on the bumpy roads of life.

Lucky Numbers: 5, 9, 20

### PISCES

Don't take any big gambles this week, the time is not right for a flight into the unknown. A newfound harmony is in store for you and your mate. Your mate will understand your fears.

Soul Affirmation: New insights create new directions and a new cast of characters.

Lucky Numbers: 34, 44, 51