



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Virginia Parole Board

April 15, 2020

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Richmond – Virginia Parole Board Chair Adrienne Bennett confirms the Board’s decision to grant parole to Vincent Lamont Martin. The Parole Board is committed to its ethical obligation to promote fair and impartial justice at all times.

Below is a statement from Chair Bennett:

“Since the news of Vincent Martin’s parole, members of the law enforcement community have spoken against the Parole Board’s decision to grant Parole. We have spent years researching this case and reviewing the facts and stand firmly behind our decision to grant his release. We strongly encourage any member of the law enforcement or criminal justice community who has concerns about this decision to conduct a similarly thorough and unbiased review of this case. We are confident that after doing so, others will reach the same conclusion.

Due to the serious nature of the offense, Vincent Martin’s parole grant decision required a super majority of four votes. On April 10, 2020, the Virginia Parole Board granted Mr. Martin parole after he received his fourth affirmative vote. This decision is final and not subject to reversal or appeal.

While the Parole Board speaks through the Chair, every Parole Board Member votes independently, and each vote carries equal weight. The Parole Board thoroughly investigates every case, as required by law and policy, prior to making a decision. The Board’s decision to grant parole to Mr. Martin after serving in excess of 40 years is not intended to diminish the life or service of the Officer Connors. Our deepest sympathy is extended to the family of Officer Connors.

The Parole Board takes seriously its constitutional and statutorily-required obligations to engage with crime victims. The Parole Board’s Victim Services Unit provides support for victims and ensures that their voices are heard by each Parole Board Member. Victim input is one of many critical considerations for the Board. The Parole Board does not make assumptions about victims who choose not to participate in the criminal justice process.

In such circumstances, Virginia Code §53.1-155 requires that “The Board shall endeavor diligently to contact the victim prior to making any decision to release any inmate on discretionary parole. The victim of a crime for which the prisoner is incarcerated may present to the Board oral or written testimony concerning the impact that the release of the prisoner will have on the victim, and the Board shall consider such testimony in its review.”

The victims as, defined by Virginia Code §19.2-11.01, were located out of state and notified that the Parole Board was strongly considering granting parole. Prior to this year, the Parole Board had never been contacted by Officer Connors’ family. After much research, the Parole Board tracked down the Officer’s family in the State of New York. Since March of 2020, the family has provided a significant amount of oral and written input to the Parole Board, which was considered by the Board Members prior to making a decision.

Ignited by the officer’s family, the Richmond Police Chief, along with other law enforcement organizations have joined in a disappointing chorus of opposition to the Parole Board’s decision. While this tactic has worked with Parole Boards in other states, this Board does not respond to this type of pressure campaign. These efforts are inappropriate and are intended to nullify the Parole Board’s decision, which again was reached after significant research, discussion and review.

Dana Schrad, Executive Director of the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police and William Smith, Chief of Police for the City of Richmond, recast this decision by the Virginia Parole Board as a “slap in the face” and a devaluation of the work of all law enforcement officers in Virginia. The Virginia Parole Board is itself a branch of law enforcement in Virginia, and is charged with making very difficult decisions on a daily basis.

Schrad and Chief Smith’s efforts to insinuate to the rank and file that Mr. Martin’s release, after forty years of incarceration and rehabilitation, is somehow an insult to their members is highly concerning and contradictory to an unbiased criminal justice system. Efforts like this to gin up support for a non-existent remedy do nothing to honor the memory of Officer Connors or to cherish the good work of our dedicated officers of the law.

Information about Court Proceedings:

In the early morning hours of November 13, 1979, Officer Connors was murdered moments after a 7-11 was robbed by three men after pulling over the assailants’ vehicle. After being implicated by a cooperating co-defendant, Vincent Martin was arrested and provided court appointed counsel. The preliminary hearing was conducted 16 days later on November 29, 1979. Vincent Martin’s first trial occurred in the Richmond Circuit Court less than 90 days later, in February of 1980, where he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

In August 1980, the Supreme Court of Virginia, reversed and remanded the case for a new trial after determining that the jury was biased, which is not a technicality. The Supreme Court found that the jury was not impartial and in its make-up “displayed an attitude so repugnant to a sense of fairness and so indicative of an ingrained and tenacious bias against one accused of a crime that ‘no amount of rehabilitation’ could purge the taint.” This is not a “technicality”. (*Martin v. Commonwealth*, 217 S.E. 2d 123 (1980)).

By December of 1980, Martin was back before the same judge for his second trial. The jury found him guilty and sentenced him to the minimum for the crimes for which he was convicted, including Life with the possibility of parole and 5 years for the robbery conviction, for which they could have imposed an additional life sentence.

The official records reflect that very little time or opportunity was afforded to Vincent Martin’s court appointed counsel to develop his defense. His requests for the appointment of an investigator were denied and evidence was withheld by a prosecutor who went on to be found guilty of multiple disciplinary actions for ethical violations, resulting in periods where his law license was suspended. In an effort to expedite the proceedings, the judge in this second trial kept jurors until late into the night. In fact, one juror collapsed from exhaustion and another was rushed to the hospital.

His conviction is based primarily upon the conflicting testimony of the three cooperating co-defendants – all whom were previously convicted of violent felonies themselves. Mr. Martin has always maintained his innocence and maintains that he was not present during the commission of these crimes. They too were convicted of murdering the officer, but were sentenced to very little time for Officer Connors’ murders. After providing testimony against Vincent Martin, the co-defendants plead guilty to the murder of Officer Connors. The co-defendants testified that they were promised nothing in exchange for their testimony, however they were rewarded handsomely weeks later with minor sentences that are tantamount to slap on the wrist for taking the life Officer Connors. All three co-defendants completed their sentences in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Vincent Martin is a Trusted Leader, Peacemaker, Mediator and Mentor:

Vincent Martin has demonstrated himself over the decades to be a trusted leader, peacemaker, mediator and mentor in the correctional community. Vincent Martin consistently receives strong support from Department of Corrections staff. “Vincent Martin is looked at as a role model, mentor, father, brother, cadre and guiding light to both staff and offenders” said one staff member. He is employed as mentor in “intake” for men as they enter the prison system. He has been infraction-free for over 30 years.

One Corrections staff member stated that “Over the decades, there are numerous instances of Vincent Martin preventing fights, stabbings, and deaths all because it was the right thing to do. Never have I seen an offender demand peace like Vincent Martin does. Vincent was once transferred from one facility to another at his annual review. Within

days of his departure, his former facility was bordering on riot status when Vincent was transferred back as he was the only one who could quell the uprising.”

Vincent Martin continues to serve as mentor, educator and leader to men post incarceration, including returned citizens residing in Richmond who have made a meaningful difference in the community working with and for Richmond Police Chief William Smith. Chief Smith has been lauded for his support of programs such as RVA League for Safer Streets, a basketball league and mentorship program designed to help reduce violent crime, improve community police relationships and elevate young men in Richmond’s public housing.

Prior to his recent death, RVA league co-founder Jawad Abdu, pled for the release of Vincent Martin. Mr. Abdu conveyed to the Parole Board that Vincent Martin’s mentorship is what put him on the trajectory to return to the Richmond community and make a change. This is true for countless others who have released on parole as well.

The Parole Board’s primary consideration in a releasing decision is public safety. The Board does not take this responsibility lightly and takes every possible precaution to ensure that a person is ready, and prepared for success prior to granting release. This decision was no different, and the Board stands firmly behind its grant of parole to Vincent Martin.”

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