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BROWARD FINAL

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

'FREE' BY NAME, IMPRISONED BY PAST

■ A Florida escapee who took the name 'Free' is back in jail for a 1970s crime, but his stunned wife and children say the upstanding and ailing family man has already paid his debt.

BY AMY DRISCOLL

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He fled Florida in 1976, leaving behind all signs of a life gone wrong after Vietnam: his crime, his conviction, his incomplete prison sentence. Even his name. He became Charles Danny

Free, culled from a student ID found in a Jacksonville motel during his first days on the run. The ID led to a driver's license and Social Security card. He married, had a family and settled in Las Vegas, where the construction business boomed.

For the next 32 years — before a Florida cold-case fugitive squad tracked him down — Free led an upright existence, teaching his kids right from wrong and passing on his trade to the younger guys, especially the ones who seemed headed down a bad path. "He's the kind of man that if you were bombed, you would want to have him in the room with you because you know you

would survive," his daughter Christina Greer said. "He's like the knight in shining armor. He's always been the rock."
A knock at his Las Vegas door Jan. 30 splintered all that. Police officers carried his old booking photo and news that stunned Free's wife and children. Charlie Free, the officers said,

•TURN TO FREE, 16A

MiamiHerald.com
See the Free family's website and read their letters at Today's Extras



HAZEN IN 1975

HAZEN IN 2008

Jack Hazen fled state prison in 1976 and became 'Charles Free,' but was caught three decades later.



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Free by name, imprisoned by past cont.

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Family seeks freedom for captured fugitive

•FREE, FROM 1A

was actually Jack Hazen, an escaped convict from Florida. He had been serving a seven-year sentence for aggravated assault in Broward County when he disappeared from a work program at a North Florida prison on May 25, 1976. Florida's Corrections Department had tracked him down after almost 32 years.

The officers gave Free a moment to hug and kiss his wife before they took him to jail, leaving the shocked family to wonder what had just happened. They stood in the doorway for about 20 min-

utes, Greer said, until they reached a decision.

"We sat down that day and said, whatever he did, it does not change the man that he is. That's our stance," said Greer, 32, of the man who married her mom and raised her since she was 3. "We agreed right then. There's no reason not to stick by him. He's our dad. We knew we were going to stand by him no matter what."

In the weeks since, they have struggled to reconcile the two distinct halves of their father's life, even as they cope with the legalities of what happens to him next. He will go before a Las Vegas

judge on Monday and will likely be sent back to Florida. More than five years of his initial sentence remain.

Free's family didn't know about his original crime until lawyers told them.

"I guess he was on hard times and was in Florida, broke," Greer said. "He'd lost a construction job. He was hungry and walked into a convenience store, filled his pockets up with food and drinks, and a lady behind the counter tried to stop him. He pulled a knife and he said, 'I'm taking it.'"

Pompano Beach police arrested him a few hours later. He ran from a prison

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work detail because he had heard other inmates planning to light a fire in his cell, his family said.

Florida Department of Corrections spokeswoman Gretl Plessinger said Hazen was assigned to a North Florida prison carpentry shop in Union County. When he fled, officers gave chase, she said.

"We did search for him with vehicles and officers and bloodhounds, and they located his scent and tracked him to a local highway and that's where they lost him," she said.

His daughters now wonder if he was having trouble dealing with his Vietnam War duty.

"He was young and stupid, and now he's 61. That's a lot of life to try to pay back a debt," Greer said. "I think he's paid it back by being a good man and a good neighbor and a loving husband and great dad and doing anything for friends and family."

Free is in poor health. He had the operable part of a brain tumor removed in 2006, and he needs medical checkups. He has multiple sclerosis. And he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease the day before his rearrest, his daughters say.

The family and his attorneys are worried he won't make the trip from Nevada to Florida in stable health, and that even if he does, he won't live to see the end of his sentence.

"To me, 31 years of living with that guilt and not being able to tell his family about it — that was enough for him," said his younger daughter, Windy Ross, 26. "I'm sure physically that hurt him. I would ask that they put him

under house arrest and don't make him die in prison."

Free's attorneys hope he will be considered for expedited clemency. Regular clemency proceedings typically take three years, they said.

"Here's a guy, a Vietnam vet, who is self-rehabilitated, and not at the cost of the taxpayers," said Tallahassee attorney Don Pumphrey Jr. "I could understand if he was a threat to society, but he's not."

His medicines alone would cost close to \$200,000 if he has to serve out his term, the family has calculated.

Pumphrey said he will lobby the governor and Cabinet for special consideration.

"This is exactly the situation that executive clemency was developed for — it's so unique and so far out there," Pumphrey said. "We're just hoping the executive branch will have mercy and exercise discretion when it comes to Mr. Free."

On Feb. 21, Gov. Charlie Crist signed papers to return Free to Florida. Last week, a spokesman wasn't promising anything.

"Like others, he will have the opportunity to apply for clemency," said Crist spokesman Thomas Philpot.

Prosecutors from Union County may also consider charging him with escape.

The daughters, who have children of their own, are trying to remain positive while working on the mysteries of their father's past. Their mother, Kathy Free, is struggling, too, they said.

A Florida Department of Law Enforcement report on Hazen says he was born in

California, and his daughters recall that he talked about surfing and took them to California on vacations. They believe he served in Vietnam as a Marine, but they know little about his military experiences. They wonder now if he has other family somewhere.

"When I got older, I thought maybe he'd had a fight with his family," said Ross, who worked with her dad at the construction firm for seven years. "We were taught that if someone doesn't bring it up, you don't ask. We were brought up to be strong and care for each other and work hard. Those were the important things."

Mystery man or not, Free has support from those who know him as a hardworking family man. The family and the court have received more than 50 letters attesting to his good character. Entire church congregations in Las Vegas are praying for him, Ross said. The family also started a website, freecharlesfree.com.

Both daughters say they know what their father did was wrong, and although they want him home, their father taught them to be honest.

"He raised us never to run from our fears and always stand up for what we believe. He taught us the total opposite of what he did 30-plus years ago," Ross said.

They have no intention of giving up their family name, Ross added.

"I've always been Free and I'll always answer to Free," she said. "I asked my dad, will we have to start with Hazen? And he says, 'No, Windy, I'm Charles Free.'"