

Reunion: picking up after 14 years a prisoner is released and welcomed home by his family. The daughter who accused him says she wants to talk.

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Carrying his toothbrush and Bible in a white plastic garbage bag, Joe Kennedy walked out of prison into sunlight Tuesday and looked up.

"I prayed that the Lord would work on the governor's heart," Kennedy said, his watery blue eyes shimmering like a free man's. "Thank you, God. I'm finally going home."

Less than an hour later, he reunited with his wife, who had been told to wait for him at their little brick house – the house he left 14 years ago when he was convicted of molesting their daughter.

State officials drove Kennedy from Rowan Correctional Institution to his northeast Guilford County home. Hundreds of yellow ribbons waved welcome, hung from trees and shrubs by family members who have always maintained Kennedy's innocence.

Kennedy's family rushed to his car and wrapped him in hugs.

"Oh, Joe, you're really here," cried Martha Ann Kennedy, Joe Kennedy's wife of 38 years. "This is the happiest day of my life."

Just hours before former Gov. Jim Hunt left office Saturday, he commuted the 62-year-old man's two life sentences to time served.

Kennedy was convicted in 1986 of molesting his teenage daughter, Vickie Kennedy. Two years ago, she recanted her story of abuse. Vickie Kennedy shared her story with the News & Record in an exclusive interview in November, soon after Greensboro attorney Don Vaughan had petitioned the governor to review the case and send Joe Kennedy home.

Vickie Kennedy bear-hugged her father during the family's reunion.

"I love you, Daddy," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. When things calm down, I want to talk. I want to try to explain."

Joe Kennedy nodded and let his daughter go. Then he pulled her close again.

"I love you, too," he whispered.

In 1986, Vickie Kennedy testified that her father raped her with sticks. At one point, she said, he forced her brother to hold her down while her father molested her on the kitchen floor. Then, she said, her father ordered her brother to do the same thing while the father held her down. All the while, she said, her mother listened from a few feet away.

No physical evidence of sexual abuse was ever found.

Vickie Kennedy, 32, says today that it was all lies. She says she was a spiteful, mixed-up teenager who lied to escape her father's strict, religious upbringing.

Vickie Kennedy is a severe diabetic who, until two years ago when she recanted her story, lived in mental hospitals and state-run group homes for people with psychological and emotional problems.

For the past two years, she's tried to get her father released and make amends with her family

The family, like Joe Kennedy, welcomed her to their reunion.

Hunt released no statement explaining why he commuted Kennedy's sentence. And the commutation isn't necessarily a ruling of innocence. As part of his release, Kennedy will be on parole for two years. After that, he will be as free as any other man. But for the rest of his life, he will have a record as a convicted sex offender.

Kennedy doesn't like that fact, but he says he can live with it.

"My family knows I'm innocent, and God knows I'm innocent. That's what matters," he said, standing beside his wife and son, Rick, in the family's cozy den.

Except for the silk daisy arrangements that have faded with the passing years, the room hasn't changed since deputies hauled Kennedy away all those years ago.

"We kept everything the same for him, in hopes of this day," Martha Ann Kennedy said.

She'd cooked all of Joe's favorites: fried chicken, potato salad, fried okra, biscuits, spiced apples and chocolate cake. She planned to serve her husband supper over candlelight.

"We've known each other since we were 5 years old. He's a good man," she said.

"I'm the luckiest woman in the world that he's mine. I would have waited a lifetime for him to come home."

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