

COMMUTE from A1*Willis among 36 people whose sentences Clinton commuted*

The president also pardoned about 140 others.

While a commutation sets a person free with time served, it does not erase their criminal record and they must still adhere to the conditions of their release.

Willis' story stretches back to the late 1980s, when he was a 19-year-old small-time drug dealer in the ring of Ralph Chavous (Plukey) Duke, the most-wanted narcotics kingpin in Minnesota.

After a lengthy investigation, state and local law enforcement officers shut down Plukey's organization on May 17, 1989. Willis and Nunn were among 24 people indicted in the case.

At his trial, evidence was presented to show that Willis had sold a quarter of an ounce of cocaine to a co-defendant, accompanied Plukey's son on a drug-buying mission to Los Angeles, and that his name was on a bag used to carry money to the sting.

When Nunn was released from a Phoenix prison last July, after serving nearly 11 years for her role in the conspiracy, Willis contacted her through a friend to congratulate her and to see if Sheldon would take his case. Sheldon met with Willis in August and, as he did with Nunn's case, took it on pro bono.

Sheldon then turned to some of the same people who supported Nunn's release, including the judge who had sentenced both Nunn and Willis more than a decade ago, U.S. District Judge David Doty, a longtime critic of mandatory minimum sentences. The guidelines, passed by Congress in the 1980s, can result in decades-long sentences for first-time offenders such as Willis.

In a letter to Clinton supporting Willis' application for commutation, Doty wrote:

"Before I pronounced Mr. Willis' sentence, I told him that he did *not* deserve the sentence that I was going to impose on him, but that I had no other choice except to do what the law required. I am still not in favor of mandatory-minimum sentences."

Also writing letters of support were Eighth Circuit Court Judge Gerald Heaney, who wrote an opinion affirming Willis' conviction 10 years ago. But in the letter asking Clinton to commute the sentence, he said, "I was deeply troubled by disparities in the sentences received by certain members of the Duke cocaine ring. Those disparities fell very heavily upon Mr. Willis."

In the final days of Clinton's presidency, Willis waited in the Duluth prison, his stomach burning with anxiety. He had

missed out on Clinton's second round of pardons and commutations around the holidays and he figured this was his last shot.

Then, at 10:35 a.m. Saturday, as Willis talked by phone to a friend in Minneapolis, he got the word.

"Man, pack your stuff," his friend said.

"What?" Willis replied.

"Pack your stuff. Your name is Kim Allen Willis, isn't it? Well, I'm looking at your name on the Internet right now. You been commuted," the friend said.

Hours later, after prison officials confirmed the news with the U.S. Justice Department, Willis walked into the prison lobby to find Nunn, who lives in Arizona, and Sheldon waiting. They had flown to Minneapolis on Friday, then driven to Duluth to wait out word on who would be freed. They were certain that Willis would be among them. Willis was stunned to see the pair standing there, smiling. Nunn embraced him.

"She started crying, I started crying, then Sam started crying," Willis said.

While incarcerated, Willis began working on his associate of arts degree from Lake Superior College and learned welding. He also participated in a prison outreach program in which inmates speak to at-risk youths.

"I wanted material things, didn't have control over my ego back then," Willis said of his life before prison. "I didn't realize the wrong that goes with it and how it hurts the community. I just tried to share my experience with those kids so hopefully they could learn from me and not make the same bad choices."

Willis says he has no time for bitterness. He's simply looking forward to finding a job, finishing his associate of arts degree and eventually getting a bachelor's degree in business, he said. For now he's just happy to be at home with his mother, his father, his sister and her children.

"I believe this was part of God's plan, my incarceration, everything," Willis said. "Maybe that was the way he needed to save me and fix me up."

Rosalind Bentley can be contacted at rbentley@startribune.com.

Find out first.

Call 612-673-4343 for home delivery of the Star Tribune newspaper.

StarTribune
It's where you live.

01/20/01