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Here's what Cyntoia Brown-Long is doing 2 years after she walked out of a Tennessee prison

Angela Dennis
Knoxville News Sentinel

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It's been two years since Cyntoia Brown-Long walked out of the Tennessee Prison for Women in Nashville and walked into a life of advocacy.

These days, her time is spent traveling with her husband Jamie, fighting human trafficking and filling her Amazon cart with materials for the DIY projects all around her Nashville house. Although she's working hard on behalf of others trapped in exploitative situations and living up to the redemption she fought long and hard for, Brown-Long says she is simply enjoying the little things that come with freedom.

"I think about this day all the time. The day I got my life back. I used to lay in my prison cell dreaming about this and where I am today. I am just so grateful," Brown-Long told Knox News in an exclusive interview.

After a life in and out of the juvenile court system, she was thrust into the human trafficking trade. Her troubled years ended with a conviction for the murder of 43-year old Johnny Allen and, over time, the feeling that there was no light at the end of the tunnel. She and many others thought she might die in a prison cell.

Brown-Long was tried as an adult in the Tennessee criminal justice system and found guilty of first-degree murder when she was just 16 years old. At the time, she was one of 90 minors in Tennessee handed what was considered a death sentence.

The grassroots efforts from celebrities and advocates plus widespread media coverage put pressure on a governor to grant her freedom at age 31 instead of well after 65. In 2019, former Gov. Bill Haslam commuted her sentence in part because of her young brain was still developing when she shot the man who was lying beside her and in part because of the "extraordinary steps" she took to rebuild her life.

Two years ago: Read Cyntoia Brown-Long's full statement on her clemency

Resiliency drove her to improve her life even when she had no idea whether she'd ever see life outside of the prison walls. While incarcerated, Brown-Long earned a stunning number of degrees: her GED, an associate's degree in liberal arts and a bachelor's degree in professional studies in organizational leadership from Lipscomb University.

“The decision to let Cyntoia go free was the right decision and I still feel that way today. I’ve had a chance to meet her and she's doing exactly what we hoped she would do, which is get out and spread the message about what happened in her life and what it looks like to do life differently,” Haslam told Knox News in July about the anniversary of her release.

The former Knoxville mayor also said that laws around juvenile life sentencing are complex.

“Cyntoia’s case was an eye-opener. This is a place where governors should look and review these cases very carefully. They are all different and rehabilitation should be the goal in our corrections system.

"In Cyntoia’s case, I felt society would be better served with her outside of prison than inside. She is an example of a person whose life has been changed and why we need to look deeply into each and every single juvenile case,” Haslam said.

In his book “Faithful Presence: The Promise and the Peril of Faith in the Public Square,” Haslam wrote that Cyntoia’s story challenged his faith and ultimately prompted him to do the right thing. Not because of outside pressure but because of his convictions.

"The story of Cyntoia's search for redemption and freedom is a beautiful story of a God who changes lives," Haslam wrote. "The story of how her life intersected with my role as governor is a story of a God of mercy and justice who calls us also to be people of mercy and justice, even when it is not always clear how we can do both at the same time."

Cyntoia Brown-Long's childhood

Cyntoia Brown-Long was born in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in 1988. While at the mercy of her mother's substance abuse problems, she was put up for adoption at 8 months old.

Despite care from a loving adoptive family, Brown-Long got caught up in the juvenile court system as a teenager and was placed in state custody where she spent years shuffling between facilities. She ran away to a life on the streets of Nashville in 2004, where her true downward spiral began. Brown-Long was forced into sex slavery surviving multiple rapes and assaults at the hands of buyers as well as by her then-boyfriend, a pimp known as Kut Throat, who sold her for drug money.

It was during a $150 exchange for sex when she killed 43-year-old real estate agent Allen as they laid in bed at his Nashville home on Aug. 6, 2004. Brown-Long shot Allen in the back of the head, was arrested and charged with homicide, aggravated robbery, handgun possession and criminal impersonation.

Brown-Long never denied shooting Allen, but she argued in court that the act was committed because she was in fear for her life. According to her, Allen continually touched her while they were laying in bed and she believed him to be reaching for a firearm so she shot him in self-defense.

In an interview with Knox News, Brown-Long opened up about criminal justice reform, the life she lives now, and where those second chances have taken her.

Q: You've done a whole lot in the last two years — you've written a book, started a nonprofit, we see you traveling and doing speaking engagements. But what is everyday life like today?

A: Goodness, It can be all over the place. I work with my nonprofit with my husband and in between my bookings and events, traveling, really one day never looks the same (as another). I also like to garden at home. It's a little bit of everything there's not routine. You know, in prison everything is a routine. You wake up, shower, eat, make a phone call and do it all over again. But right now my life, it's not like that and you know I just really love it. I love my life somewhat being all over the place because for so long I was used to something else.

Q: It's been two years since your release from the Tennessee Prison for Women after spending your teenage years and all of your young adult life incarcerated. What does it mean to have that freedom today?

A: I am just so thankful not only to be free now but to be able to do everything I had been dreaming of for all of those years. I wanted to get out and travel the country and speak about my life and I have been blessed to be able to do that. I have a home now and I am just grateful for that every single day. When I wake up, my day is mine.

Q: I know that even though your sentence was commuted, many were surprised that you still had to complete 10 years of parole. What is it like to live under the supervision of the Department of Corrections even though you've been released?

A: I wouldn't say it's difficult only because there are people who would love to be able to just be out of prison. So even though I have to go get permission to travel out of state, I'm OK with that. At times it's not as convenient, for example right now my husband is flying out of state today, and I can't fly out with him because I have to wait on my travel permit to come back so I will have to meet him there. But it's minor in nature compared to being incarcerated. I can now travel to other counties without permission so that's eased up a bit. My parole officer is great and really works with me when something comes up. I can't just wake up and go to Vegas one morning last minute but that's OK.

Q: You were originally handed a life sentence at just 16 years old. What are your hopes in regard to change specifically within Tennessee when it comes to juvenile life sentences?

A: I have so many thoughts on that. More than I can fit into an interview.

Most importantly, the juvenile life sentences here in Tennessee, as you know, kids can be sentenced to the same amount of time as adults. So we have 15- and 16-year-olds being sentenced to 51 years in prison so they can't even have a hope of walking out of there. If you look at my story and even some of the women I was incarcerated with, you can see that it doesn't take 51 years for someone to be rehabilitated in their life and be a productive member of society. These children should have an opportunity to go before the parole board and ask for a second chance.

The legislation that I want to propose would give them that opportunity. Other groups of lobbyists and legislators that I work with want to also advocate for a 30-year maximum having to be served rather than where it stands now at 51 years. Honestly, I would like that time to be shorter, more like 15 to 20 years. We are going to keep putting out heads together and try to push for that.

Q: Governor Bill Haslam granted you clemency shortly before he left office. How do you feel about him and his decision today?

A: I just respect him as a leader and a man of God. He was put into a difficult position. As a politician, you are always having to weigh what you should do, what your constituents want, and that's not easy. But for him, it came down to doing the right thing.

I have been reading his book where he spoke on my case. I just commend him and continue to be grateful. It is my prayer that Gov. (Bill) Lee has that same moment of reflection where he will refuse to go about politics as usual and maybe shake things up a bit and do what's right for the people. I'm also grateful to all of the people, activists, and grassroots organizations, for fighting for me. There are so many other people in my situation who are incarcerated who are waiting to be seen as well so I'm thankful for the work that they do.

Q: You were sentenced at 16 and released as an adult so you missed out on a lot of what would have been your teenage and young adult years. What has that transition been like and what were some of those "first" moments that meant the most to you?

A: I've experienced so many of those firsts. Just last week I was in a pool for the first since I was a kid. I went to Niagara Falls for the first time last month. Every day is just like a fairytale for me. I laugh about it now because I was scared to drive for the longest when I got out, but I got my driver's license and now you can't keep me in the house.

My husband surprised me with a car, so I studied the guide and took my driving test, and passed on the first time. Curbs aren't my best friend but I am on the road now. I am very careful though because I know that anything can land me back in prison. I have those same fears that a lot of Black people have when we are behind the wheel. Like if I get pulled over, am I going to be OK? I keep my car completely empty like a rental car, I have my registration and insurance in a place where I don't have to reach for it. I take all of those precautions, although it's unfortunate that we have to do that. Nowadays that's where we are at so I'm proactive. I pray every time I get behind the wheel.

Q: What's next for you personally and professionally? What can we look forward to next from you?

A: Well I'm happy to say I am currently working on my second book in between everything else in life. I'm still hammering out the chapters. It's definitely a follow-up to my first book, but in this one, I will be talking more about what people may not understand when it comes to reentering society. It talks about the struggles with that, and all of the adversity and controversy my husband and I have faced. The experiences I've encountered along the way have been really eye-opening for me. I want to look more into how can we help support people who are reentering society and what that really looks like.

Of course, my husband and I have The Glitter Project which is part of our JFam Foundation which is part of an effort to educate on youth trafficking and I'm partnering with Epic Girl, an organization in Nashville that provides mentorship to at-risk girls.

I'm also working on a new television project with Starz that is in the works. We are still in the development stages so I can't say too much but it's coming. I want to also get some legislation going to make Jan. 29 domestic youth trafficking day here in Tennessee.

The work I do is so personal to me so it's hard to separate the two it's become part of who I am.