

Oregon woman endures fear and despair in illegal imprisonment in Coffee Creek prison

Terri Lee Brown was released from Coffee Creek Correctional Facility after the Oregon Supreme Court found Gov. Tina Kotek’s order that sent her back to prison was unlawful

BY BEN BOTKIN - MAY 16, 2024 6:00 AM



The entrance of Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, Oregon's only women's prison. (Ben Botkin/Oregon Capital Chronicle)

Terri Lee Brown’s life spun upside down in February, when the state of Oregon illegally sent her to Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.

The 48-year-old Grants Pass woman never saw it coming.

She had finished parole in 2023 after her early release from prison in December 2020 as part of a wave of commutations granted during the pandemic to nearly 1,000 inmates. In Brown’s case, she was released eight months early while serving a five-year sentence for mail theft. A little more than two years later, Brown’s parole officer gave her a certificate of completion in February 2023.

Brown proudly hung the certificate on her kitchen wall as she continued to rebuild her life. She became a home health care worker, tending to the needs of bedridden people in her Grants Pass community. At nights, she worked as a hotel auditor to make ends meet.

About a year after she received her certificate, Brown’s life crashed down when police showed up at her house, notifying Brown there was a warrant out for her arrest. Gov. Tina Kotek had issued an order revoking her commuted sentence and sending her back to prison.

“This isn’t a small mistake. Maybe I’m a number to them, but I am a person and you destroyed me for no reason.”

– Terri Lee Brown, freed from unlawful imprisonment in Oregon

But Kotek lacked the authority to issue the revocation, the Oregon Supreme Court ruled on May 8. That meant Brown’s imprisonment since February was unlawful, the court found. Attorneys with the nonprofit Oregon Justice Resource Center who represented Brown in court successfully argued that the governor cannot retroactively revoke a person’s commutation and send them back to prison when they have already completed the sentence.

Government attorneys tried to make the case that a prior parole violation warranted a return to prison, even though the incident happened in 2021 and Brown had spent 30 days in jail in the matter. And two years later in 2023, state officials told Brown she had successfully completed her post-prison supervised release.

“This isn’t a small mistake,” Brown said in an interview with the Capital Chronicle. “Maybe I’m a number to them, but I am a person and you destroyed me for no reason.”

No apology from governor

The unusual case sheds light on the state’s penal system and shows how an error in judgment – even at the highest level of state government – can put a person in prison unlawfully. A spokesperson for Kotek previously said the governor would take the court’s ruling under consideration in future decisions.

As for Brown, no one from the governor’s office or state has contacted her to apologize.

“I’ve heard from not one person,” Brown said. “Nobody’s contacted me to say they’re sorry. It would mean a lot. Admit you’re wrong. Say you’re sorry. That goes a long way. It helps.”

The governor needs to explain herself as to how and why she made these decisions and have a level of transparency around this.

– Bobbin Singh, Oregon Justice Resource Center executive director

Anca Matica, a spokesperson for Kotek’s office, didn’t reply to an inquiry about whether the governor owes Brown an apology.

Bobbin Singh, executive director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, said Brown’s experience should concern all Oregonians. He said that Brown received no notice, and the timeline – with a December 2023 arrest warrant based upon a two-year-old parole sanction – makes no sense.

“The governor needs to explain herself as to how and why she made these decisions and have a level of transparency around this,” Singh said.

Unexpected return to prison

Brown’s arrest, drawn from court documents, shows the chaos and confusion she endured.

On Saturday, Feb. 17, four police officers met Brown at her home and arrested her, saying she was under arrest for mail theft. She protested and an officer then told her she was under arrest for violating her parole.

Her daughter looked at Brown, sad and confused her mother was in trouble again.

“It broke my heart,” Brown said. “It made me cry because I never wanted my kids to look at me like that again. And when they arrested me that’s how she looked at me because she didn’t understand why they were arresting me.”



Terri Lee Brown with her two daughters Bobbie Rideout (left) and Jeslyn Rideout (right). (Courtesy of Terri Lee Brown)

Brown asked her daughter to retrieve her certificate of completion from her kitchen wall, but it didn’t stop the arrest. Brown was gripped by a panic attack and asked for an inhaler before an ambulance took her to the hospital.

After a doctor’s visit, Brown was booked in the county jail and forced to wait until Tuesday because of the Presidents Day holiday weekend to get more help.

After about four days in jail, Brown learned from a county parole and probation official that her commutation had been revoked, prompting a warrant for her arrest from the Oregon Board of

Parole and Post-Prison Supervision.

Brown insisted it was a mistake because she was no longer under any supervision. The supervisor told Brown that everyone in the office was dumbfounded and no one had seen a situation like hers, Brown said in her court statement.

On Feb. 22, she was transferred to Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, Oregon’s only women’s prison.

Life in prison

Every chance she could get, Brown talked to prison staff, including release counselors.

Their answer was always the same: They didn’t know what happens when a person returns to prison after their release on a sentence commutation, Brown said.

“I really was given no answers, and I just didn’t know where to turn,” Brown said. “I didn’t know how I was going to help myself and was feeling overwhelmed.”

Amber Campbell, an Oregon Department of Corrections spokesperson, said it’s not the role of agency counselors or other staff to provide legal advice to people in custody. They have a phone system to contact attorneys and a legal library for that purpose, Campbell said.

Brown said she faced indifference in a system that made no effort to believe her. Brown said it was painful.

“Nobody will listen to you and they’re laughing at you pretty much like you’re crazy,” she said. “Nobody believed my story.”

I was in turmoil. I couldn’t sleep at night. I would literally cry myself to sleep because I just was at a loss.

– Terri Lee Brown, freed from unlawful imprisonment in Oregon

Lockdowns on her unit were frequent, keeping her confined to a cell for 18 hours a day or longer. Brown paced in the tiny cell she shared with an inmate, with a toilet next to her bed. She worried about her five grown children and wondered how they were faring as she fights for her release.

Brown feared she would have to accept the injustice. This would mean missing out on the lives of her grown children and the birth of a grandchild.

“I was in turmoil,” she said. “I couldn’t sleep at night. I would literally cry myself to sleep because I just was at a loss.”

‘Best day ever’

After the daily count of inmates, Brown checked her computer tablet and saw a message from Julia Yoshimoto, her attorney and director of the center’s Women’s Justice Project, that she won her case.

“I just started crying,” Brown said. “I couldn’t believe it, and I’m like, ‘I won. I won. They’re gonna release me.’”

Her fellow inmates crowded around her to congratulate her and offer advice. Without that ruling, Brown said, she would have been stuck in the prison until October.

“It was the best day ever,” Brown said. “You know what I mean?”

She remembers the minute of her release: 3:25 p.m.

Kyle Black, policy and outreach Associate for the Oregon Justice Resource Center, drove Brown home from the prison. She had a gift, too: \$700 from formerly incarcerated people who took up a collection to help her out.

More than anything, Brown said, she’s thankful that someone listened to her case and fought for her.

But now that she’s out, she faces starting again once more.



Terri Lee Brown outside Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville on May 8, 2024, when she was released. (Courtesy of Terri Lee Brown)

Rebuilding her life

Brown is focusing on regaining her health after several stressful months. Her heart rate is abnormally high and she experiences panic attacks.

Her health care was inadequate in prison, she said, further exacerbating her condition. As a result, she cannot immediately return to work.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said. “I feel so defeated because what I worked so hard for is gone.”

Brown will struggle to pay the \$1,800-a-month rent for her three-bedroom house in Grants Pass she shares with her boyfriend and two of her children. And she has a felony, making it difficult to find employment. This is one reason Brown became a self-employed home health care worker.

But Brown also recognizes she is lucky. Without her family’s support and the Oregon Justice Resource Center’s attorneys handling her case, she’d still be in prison.

“I am a strong person and I’m going to be OK,” Brown said. “But what if this had happened to somebody who didn’t have the resources and love and the backing that I do? Where would that put them? Who would be there to help them?”