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Lifelong Criminal Tries to Put Prison Behind Him

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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ROCHESTER, N.Y. (AP) -- On a rare visit to his childhood home, Eddie Williams is 16 again, peering down a shotgun barrel as he crouches in the kitchen doorway. The intruder then swivels and shoots, and Williams sees his mother, a pastor's widow, tumble face down on the yellow linoleum floor.

"I was never scared, just shocked," he recalls in a voice husky with emotion. "I distinctly remember the blood coming from under her."

Twenty-five years have passed and the careworn house on Tremont Street is hardly changed. Williams points out the two-story rear extension his father built to accommodate 11 children, and it triggers a tide of happy memories. "I can never say I didn't feel love as a child," he says.

At 41, having spent more than half his adult years behind bars for a string of drug-fueled burglaries and thefts, Williams is back chasing ghosts. Released from prison in January for a fourth time, he has signed up with a re-entry program designed to help even high-risk convicts adjust better outside.

By late summer, he hasn't found a job, has broken up with a longtime girlfriend and is looking the worse for wear. So the old questions loom once more: Can Eddie Williams put his life of drug addiction and crime behind him, soothe family betrayals, find a redemptive place in a society that has passed him by?

Ann Graham, who oversees therapy, job training and other re-entry services at Catholic Family Center, gives newly released inmates plain advice: "You're not good at this, so stop doing it." Williams would agree: During one drug-addled break-in, he sat down to eat a sandwich, dozed off and was awakened by a cop.

An internal change is invariably the key, re-entry advocates say. The 380 men in this year's Rochester-area program, a model tried across New York since 2006 after finding success in Georgia, Michigan and other states, range from 16 years on up. It's the older ones who seem to hear Graham's message best.

"The hardest thing for many guys, especially as they get old, is to have anything to live for when they get out," she says. "They've burned a lot of bridges, and the connections they make get broken over and over again.

"In the end, most want what everybody else wants, to earn a decent living, have a family who will love them and who they can love. Unfortunately, a lot take this very circuitous route" before realizing that what "really makes them happy in life, they're X-ing themselves out of by their actions."

Weeks before walking out of Orleans prison in western New York, Williams feels acutely the "doubled-edge sword" sensation of imminent freedom. "There's always the euphoria coming at you and, at the same time, fear of the unknown," he says in a dimly lit canteen as the warden stands listening.

With his radiant smile, the muscled, 220-pound, 5-foot-9 felon puts a sunny cast on his dreams of getting married and becoming a draftsman. Or perhaps a preacher. He speaks persuasively of an earnest effort to mend his ways, but is often cagey when pressed for details.

Williams blames his wayward life on a devastated childhood. A suitor spurned by his 39-year-old mother showed up one August night in 1984, shot her dead and threatened to harm Eddie and elder brothers Ray and Jesse before killing himself. Six younger children were asleep upstairs.

Jessie Mae Williams took a bank clerk job after her husband, Cliff, a no-nonsense Pentecostal minister, died of cancer in 1979. Losing control over her six rambunctious sons, she befriended neighbor James Florence, a married mechanic, and realized too late she had reason to fear. He had served three years for killing a girlfriend with a rifle blast in 1975.

In a neighborhood burdened by a culture of violence that was transforming Rochester into New York's perennial murder capital, a tight-knit, church-going family unraveled.

Ray got hooked on alcohol. John was caught dealing drugs. Eric was accused of scaring an 89-year-old woman to death during a 1990 burglary with two other teens; his murder conviction for ignoring her pleas to fetch her heart pills was overturned on appeal. By that time, Eddie was finishing his first prison term.

A cousin gave him his first gun, Williams says, and they practiced by shooting at stray dogs. He locked in with a street crew and progressed from selling drugs to fleecing rival dealers. He says he splurged on cocaine and prostitutes and bought cars for cash off the showroom floor.

While his brothers eventually gave up lawbreaking, got jobs and raised families, Williams' singular focus was stealing valuables, typically jewelry from unoccupied houses, to pay for his next fix.

Arrested 40 times, he has totted up six felony and 16 misdemeanor convictions mainly for burglary, grand larceny and drug possession. In 2003, he drew five years for attempted robbery.

Williams says drugs have turned his waking hours into "100 percent manipulation" of everyone he knows and loves. "For my parents to have to go out like that, that's where my anger came from. I blame everybody else."

His siblings call him the talent of the family -- a gifted sketch artist with a sharp wit and a good heart -- but their sympathy is outweighed by weary frustration at his utter lack of motivation. Williams has never kept a job for more than a few weeks.

"He was always just a big waste," gripes John Williams, a restaurant cook. "Give me half of the choices this guy got. (Mom) dying didn't happen just to him.

"I've been locked up, but I learned. I had my first kid, I said that was it. Eddie's more dangerous to himself than to others. You expect the light bulb is going to come on and it don't. I think he took it out. We keep hoping."

Inmates moved into special dorms at Orleans prison meet for up to four months with counselors, community agencies and employers to prepare them for re-entering society. "This is probably the biggest thing that has come along in years," Superintendent Sibatu Khahaifa says.

Instead of leaving with just \$40 and a bus ticket, re-entry's holistic approach helps them find affordable housing, treatment for mental health and substance abuse, even jobs. Williams is signed up right away for health insurance, food stamps, group therapy.

He moves in with Shenequa Washington, 30, a mother of two he charmed in 2003 during her jail visit with a cousin.

Within weeks, Williams steals \$1,000 she's been saving to buy him a car. He blows it on a crack binge. When he returns to her home in a low-rent neighborhood, she takes him back in, and he manages to pass periodic cocaine tests required by his parole officer.

Barred from seeking a job for six months so he can concentrate on staying clean, he fills the days visiting relatives, lifting weights at the [YMCA](#), accompanying his new family to church. Bewitched by Washington's 9-year-old daughter, Robynnique, he dons a thrift store suit and accompanies her to a [Valentine's Day](#) prom.

"She's one of the main reasons I'm still at my record-setting pace," he says gleefully in July, already his longest span of freedom in a decade. But despite "moments of clarity where I see it's dumb to live your life like this," he admits getting high remains foremost in his mind.

With Washington working two jobs as a cashier, their quarrels over his emotional withdrawal, his preference for video games over simple chores, take a toll. He's now breaking his curfew by disappearing at night. In September, she tells him to move out.

"I'm easy to please as long as I'm being loved," she says. "He's an awesome person but he's not hacking it being out. I don't understand why he won't use his talents. He don't be dealing with the real world."

Williams moves in with John for two weeks, steals stereo equipment and an Xbox 360 from a sister's house, and vanishes. His return to trouble raises questions about his capacity to lift himself from his past.

Police responding to prank 911 calls spot Williams near a deserted intersection. Fearing he's armed, a sergeant says he shines a flashlight into Williams' bulging pocket, sees a crack pipe and then finds cocaine in his sock.

His bid to plead guilty to drug possession is turned down by a judge who decides police lacked probable cause to search him. The charge is to be dismissed.

Still, after missing a court appearance, Williams has his parole revoked and he's ordered

back to prison for 12 months.

The Orleans re-entry unit easily beats the national recidivism rate of 39 percent in the first year out: Only 8 percent of the program's inmates freed in 2008 have so far returned to state prison, officials say.

Addicts are invariably the hardest to help.

"If not for drug issues, Williams would probably melt into oblivion" in middle age because "crime is a young man's game," Graham says. "What we're really asking people to do is mimic a middle-class lifestyle with neither the money nor the social underpinning. Some are not going to do it."

She says it's "not impossible" Williams may get into a lengthy residential drug center for the first time. "Really, what's the point of locking him up to the tune of \$35,000 a year?"

In his jail limbo, Williams is 50 pounds lighter, his eyes clouded from medication for a 2001 stroke that makes his left side tingle. He doesn't feel he can function outside. "I don't love this place either but it's like an escape from all the other stuff," he says.

"The minute they let me go, I let this insane dude loose to take over and run my life. It's not just the drugs. I buy into the whole lifestyle, the fast pace, the dangers, an underworld filled with hookers, dealers, gunslingers, and I love it. I become a completely different person. You can't tell me nothing."

He cannot fathom what his future holds. All he knows is the past is littered with "crazy and impossible dreams left crushed and broken" while, up ahead, "the road is clean."

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