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## **Free-er again**

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He went to prison as a teenager -- a street-corner drug dealer working for a friend's brother -- convicted for the attempted robbery and murder of a North Philadelphia businessman.

He came out 15 years into a life sentence, a 34-year-old adult married to a woman he had never lived with and into a technological world that left him long behind, through a Philadelphia judge's ruling that he and his friend were wrongly convicted of the Aug. 31, 1995 slaying of Thomas Keal, 52.

If anyone can attest to the mind-bending twists of life, it's Eugene Gilyard. And if he and Lance Felder, also 34, are not yet truly free – the District Attorney's office is re-investigating Keal's killing and could decide to retry them – the chain linking them to prison is now a lot looser.

On Dec. 13, just over one month after she ordered the men freed on \$20,000 bail and electronically monitored house arrest, Common Pleas Court Judge Rose Marie DeFino-Nastasi ended their house arrest.

"He was married and he wanted to live with his wife," said Marissa B. Bluestine, legal director of the Pennsylvania Innocence Project, which backed the post-conviction appeal that resulted in the order for a new trial and a reprieve from the life sentences the two were serving. "Now he and his wife's dream has come true."

Bluestine said Gilyard and his wife, Sheri Anderson, were married in a Muslim ceremony several years ago while he was in prison. Anderson was someone he knew from his teen years in his old neighborhood.

After Gilyard and Felder were released on bail on Nov. 8, Gilyard went to live in the house of his mother, Christine Gilyard Ellison, and Felder with sister Sandra Felder. There they remained, their whereabouts electronically monitored with ankle bracelets, except for court hearings, meetings with lawyers or medical appointments. Felder is still living with his sister.

In addition to giving the men the freedom to live independently and move around a city they knew from the early '90s, Bluestine said the end of house arrest enables the men to get occupational training and look for jobs. Both are now working with the Philadelphia-based Impact Services Corp.'s re-entry program for ex-offenders, Bluestine said.

Meanwhile, Judge DeFino-Nastasi has set Feb. 21 for a hearing where city prosecutors will update the status of their investigation and whether Gilyard and Felder will be retried for Keal's killing.

Keal, a popular North Philadelphia businessman who owned a bar and seafood store, was walking home about 2 a.m. on Aug. 31, 1995 when he was confronted by two armed men at 17th Street and Erie Avenue.

When Keal resisted demands for money and went for his own weapon, one robber shot him in the leg with a sawed-off shotgun. After Keal was on the ground, witnesses said the other gunman shot him in the head with a handgun.

Gilyard and Felder were not arrested until January 1998 and then on the basis of a shaky photo identification by Keal's daughter. Tonya Keal glimpsed her father's shooting for about five seconds from her apartment above his seafood store. Keal's was the only evidence against the pair; there was no physical evidence.

Gilyard, however, never gave up on his campaign to prove his innocence and two years ago convinced the Temple University-based Pennsylvania Innocence Project to follow up on leads he found

In June 2011, Innocence Project investigators obtained a statement from Ricky "Rolex" Welborn, now 35, a West Philadelphia man serving life for an unrelated murder. Welborn, who sometimes worked as an enforcer for the drug gang operated by Felder's oldest brother, confessed that he and another man he refused to identify had tried to rob and then shot Keal. Welborn said Gilyard and Felder had nothing to do with the crime.

Gilyard and Felder always insisted they were innocent and Gilyard told police he knew the gunmen who killed Keal by their street names, "Rolex" and "Tizz."

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