



Jacobs Celebrates Freedom Ex-inmate Shops, Meets Old Friends

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Sonia Jacobs was reborn at exactly 6:50 p.m. on Oct. 9 -- the moment she was released from prison after being on Death Row for nearly 4 1/2 years and behind bars for nearly 17 years.

"I don't know who I am. I am a newly created person," said an exuberant Jacobs on Saturday night at a party thrown for her by two of her attorneys in their Miami home.

"I've been blessed and I'll never forget it," she said. "I slept in a beautiful hotel. I've eaten real food and I have free-world dirt on me."

Jacobs, 45, won her freedom on Friday by entering "pleas of convenience" to second-degree murder charges in the 1976 shooting deaths of two police officers in Deerfield Beach. She was sentenced to time served and released.

She had won a new trial in February, overturning her conviction on two counts of first-degree murder that carried a life sentence with no possibility of parole for at least 25 years.

On Friday, Jacobs slept in an oceanview room at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach, drank champagne and talked throughout the night with old friends, and took a bubble bath.

"I hope if this is a dream, I stay in a coma and I never wake up," said Jacobs, with a glass of champagne in her hand during Saturday's party.

Her fellow inmates in prison had told her she might be afraid of her new world, where there are no locked doors, prison walls or guards. But for Jacobs there was only excitement at her new life.

"The first thing she wanted was a bubble bath," said Richard Strafer, one of Jacobs' lead attorneys, who threw the party with his wife, Holly Skolnick, another of the lead attorneys.

"They don't allow them to have baths in prison, only showers" Strafer said. "She sat in the tub and drank champagne."

Nearly 100 friends, former inmates who had been in prison with Jacobs, a rabbi and several of the lawyers who fought for Jacobs' release hugged and celebrated her new life. Jacobs wept as

she hugged friends who have stood by her during her years of imprisonment. One was Rabbi Richard Rockland of Lantana, who has known Jacobs since she was a child and was the rabbi in her parents' congregation in North Carolina.

"This is a great day, a great moment," Rockland said. "She is a wonderful soul who is going to make a contribution to this world."

Rockland said Jacobs did not spend her prison years being bitter. She spent her time meditating and inspiring fellow inmates to have a positive attitude and hold on to their hope for the future.

"She meditated on Death Row," Rockland said. "She learned to get rid of negative things and let go of the pain in her life. She even had to let go of her own children."

Jacobs was late to her own party because her friends had trouble dragging her out of the Aventura Mall in north Dade County, where she went shopping for the first time since 1976.

"Imagine wearing a yellow-colored prison shift for 17 years," said friend Dodi Wright of Tampa. "It was hard to drag her out of the mall."

Jacobs, dressed on Saturday evening in new black shorts, shoes and a maroon blouse, smiled as she said she had no trouble remembering how to shop.

One of the guests at the party said it was a bittersweet moment for her to see Jacobs released. Kay Tafero, the mother of Jesse Tafero, who was executed in 1990 for his conviction in the shooting of the two officers, said she cried when she learned about Jacobs' release.

"They were both innocent," Tafero said. "I would like to see them both out together, but I'm just happy for her. I'm never going to get my son back. They killed the wrong man."

Jacobs, who has a son and daughter who grew up while she was in prison, plans to visit her son and granddaughter in the next few days at their home in North Carolina. While in the state, she also will visit the graves of her parents, who died in an airplane crash while she was in prison.

"She has a lot of unresolved things to settle," said Micki Dickoff, her childhood friend and a documentary filmmaker who helped free Jacobs.

Under the pleas of convenience, worked out in a deal with Broward State Attorney Michael Satz, Jacobs did not concede guilt. Rather, the legal maneuver recognized that it was in her best interest to plead guilty and be immediately freed.

Satz has said he agreed to the plea bargain because Walter Rhodes, the chief witness against Jacobs, had recanted his testimony at least three times since the first trial.

Rhodes was with Jacobs and her boyfriend, Tafero, the night of the shootings. In exchange for not being sentenced to death, Rhodes testified for the state that Tafero and Jacobs were the shooters. Rhodes is serving a life sentence.

Jacobs and Tafero were convicted of the Feb. 20, 1976, shooting deaths of Florida State Trooper Philip A. Black and off-duty Canadian Constable Donald R. Irwin at a rest stop off Interstate 95.

In February of this year, a federal appeals court in Atlanta ordered a new trial for Jacobs, ruling that evidence was withheld from Jacobs' attorneys during the first trial.