

# Charles Livingston— Free indeed

## “Mrs. Livingston, you’ll never see your son walk the streets of Columbia again.”

These words rang in Carrie Livingston’s ears as Dick Harpootlian, then Columbia’s Deputy Circuit Solicitor, stood before the court, asking the jury to convict her 32-year-old son for murders he didn’t commit.

Months earlier, in October 1981, police arrested West Columbia native Charles Livingston, along with Willie Stroman and Frank McDowell, for the murders of a voodoo-practicing “root doctor” and three others during a robbery gone fatally wrong. An accomplice liability in South Carolina known as *The Hand of One, the Hand of All* allows a judge to deliver an equal sentence to someone associated with an offender, even if he didn’t commit the crime. Thus, while McDowell confessed and was later convicted of the murders, Charles’ close association with him also allowed the judge to sentence Charles to life in prison.

Despite having enjoyed success in the business world in the years leading up to the crime, Charles had wanted more. The drug world lured him and paved his path to the two drug dealers. He’d chosen their company, and now he’d share their fate—multiple, consecutive sentences, including ten terms of life imprisonment. Harpootlian, satisfied despite not having garnered the electric chair verdict he’d sought, would later say in the July 1, 1982, *Sumter Daily*: “I think you will never see these individuals again.”

Carrie Livingston hung her head and cried.



Charles entered the Columbia Correctional Institute (CCI) a bitter and broken man. Appeals and hope failed. The darkness

of Charles’ future drove him to despair. One evening, as he lay on his bed, a thought drifted into his mind: *Do you want to be better or stay bitter?* He tossed the thought aside, but it hounded him until he surrendered. “I want to be better,” he said.

Soon after, the state transferred Charles to Kirkland Correctional Institute, where a fellow inmate, Frank Sosebee, invited him to church. “I told him I wasn’t interested. I was seeing guys go in and come out of church no different. I didn’t want to be a part of that.” Charles dropped his defenses, however, when Frank explained that church was about his own relationship with God, no one else’s. “I went in,” he said, “and enjoyed all of it.”

When Kairos Prison Ministry offered a four-day program to introduce inmates to Christianity, Charles signed up. God saved him in 1984 through the program. From the start, Charles was serious about his faith. “I’m going to accept Christ,” he decided. “I’m going to accept him with my whole heart. I won’t waiver. I’m just going to serve him with everything I have.”



### By Jean Wilund

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Charles' mother noticed the change first. His dark eyes began to shine. His soft-spoken nature and enduring smile reflected light where there had only been darkness. Formerly hostile and hopeless, Charles became kind and optimistic.

Sadly, Harpootlian's words came true for Carrie. She passed away in 2011. She never saw her son walk the streets of Columbia again, but she watched him walk in freedom from sin, guilt, and anger. To her, this meant even more.

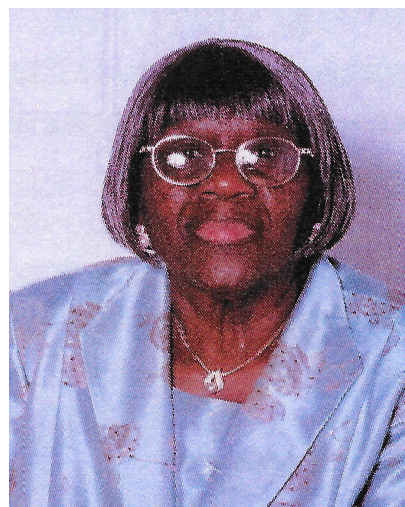
## “So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed” (John 8:36).

Charles' life continued to change when he was transferred to Manning Correctional Institute. Benedict College's Gospel Choir arrived to perform on Easter in 1989. As the inmates entered the chapel, the choir's chaplain, Paula Rheubottom, stared in shock as her old high school buddy shuffled in. “Livingston!” she exclaimed. Speechless, Charles stared in equal astonishment.

Paula soon became a regular visitor at Manning. “God began to put a love for Charles in my heart,” Paula said, and thus began a bond of love that time and prison bars tested but couldn't destroy.

Paula's passion for prayer inspired Charles to form a prayer ministry called the Minute Men Prison Group. Their prayers,

Charles' life continued to change when he was transferred to Manning



Charles Livingston's mother, Carrie.

and Charles' impeccable prison record, led the warden to offer his own conference room as a meeting place. Encouraged by this display of God's blessing, the group began to pray for Charles' release despite Harpootlian's declaration to the contrary.

In 1996, Charles sat before the parole board, but his hopes sank when the board stamped his request *Denied*. Year after year, the parole board rejected Charles' request. The annual disappointments devastated him, and bitterness crept back in. Then God gave him a promise: “I'll never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5).

Even with the comfort of God's promise, Charles felt like the Israelites in the book of Exodus, who wandered for 40 years in the wilderness before God brought them into the Promised Land. One day, as Charles felt particularly weary of his wilderness experience, he sensed God speaking to his heart. *You haven't been here 40 years yet*. In that moment, Charles understood that it was God who would decide when his



Charles Livingston and Paula Rheubottom shortly after they met.

time in prison was fulfilled, not the parole board. Afterward, he approached each parole hearing with peace. “God's going to do it in his timing,” he told everyone.

Charles' faith proved contagious. Despite her family and friend's encouragement to be *sensible* and give up on Charles and his release, Paula refused. Joe Foster, the Prison Ministries Chaplain for Cross Over Prison Ministry, didn't give up either. Before each parole board hearing, Joe promised Charles, “I'm going to throw you a pig pickin' when you get out.”

Each year, Charles called Joe back and said, without a whisper of bitterness, “This isn't the year for a pig pickin', Joe.”

In 2002, Charles was transferred back to Kirkland. His stellar reputation preceded him, earning him the position of senior clerk in Chaplain John Houser's office. Over the years, he organized volunteer programs such as Sunday morning church services, the Benjamin Mays criminal



From left to right: Joe Foster, Charles, Paula, Angie Foster, and Pastor James Murray.

justice training program, the World of Winners re-entry program, and the Inmate of the Year award. “God allowed me to do things I couldn’t believe,” Charles said.

Nor could he believe the numerous inmates who placed their faith in Christ after seeing what God had done in Charles’ life. He continued to pray for God to release him, while still living with peace and purpose in prison.

On July 9, 2014, Charles again sat before the parole board. Letters of support had poured in for his release. One unexpected letter rose to the top—a letter from none other than Dick Harpootlian, asking the board to approve Charles’ request for parole. This time, after 33 years, the chairman of the parole board reached for a different stamp—*Approved*.

On September 3, 2014, a smiling Chaplain Houser escorted Charles

outside Kirkland to the waiting arms of a tearful Paula and his exuberant family. As Paula drove Charles through the prison gates, he threw his hands into the air, finally free of the physical shackles that had held him so long, and shouted, “Hallelujah!”

The world had changed a lot in the 33 years he’d been incarcerated, but what was more surprising to Charles than iPhones and iPads was, “Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fiery furnace without even the smell of smoke on them,

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*If you’d like to invite Charles and Paula to speak to your group, you may contact Charles at 803-673-3285 or Paula at 803-331-7778.*



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## A Savior with Skin

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had forgotten I was wearing it. The gold shines beautiful there against the black backdrop of my top.

The cross. God's message to us, his assurance that everything really is okay.

**The cross! I pray the young man and train passengers saw the cross today, dangling from the neck of someone who said, "I'll help you."**

The cross speaks truth when we're desperately lost and need to know there's a way. The cross is the daily reminder when we're buried in the daily to-dos. The cross says when we were without hope in this world ... Jesus came. When we were aliens and strangers ... Jesus came. When we were separated, isolated, excluded from citizenship ... Jesus came. When we were **dead** in our transgressions and sins ... Jesus came.

He hoisted the cross, and he bridged the gap and went the distance, and he reached out and he rescued the needy. With complete competency and wild devotion he said, **"I will help you."**

There in the mirror, I look at the cross against the backdrop of black. In my weakness and inability and failure, smelling of urine and mud, I hear its message afresh: **"Don't be afraid, you little Jacob. I will help you."**

It's the hope of the redeemed that changed my life. It's the Truth that propels me into the streets, into the classroom, and onto the subways. The cross changes everything.

**We're redeemed.** *ROC*



## Free Indeed

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I stepped out without even the smell of prison on me. It feels like I was never there. Nobody can get any glory or credit for that but God."

With despair and bitterness forgotten, Charles is enjoying a brand new start. He and Paula plan to spend the next year getting to know each other from the same side of the prison bars before choosing their long-awaited wedding date. He works as a consultant with his church, Heart Epochs in Columbia, while looking toward a future career. Paula ministers weekly to women in prison and works as a ceramics instructor at Greenview Park. Together they speak wherever God opens a door for them to share the story of what he's done in their lives.

Charles still thinks of his mother often. If he could send her a message, he knows what it would say: "Mrs. Livingston, your son is free, and he's headed to a pig pickin'." *ROC*



Charles at the Pig Pickin that Joe and Angie Foster held to celebrate his release last September.