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Maria Robins-Somerville & Hannah Miller
3015 WORDS
George Hill

George Hill's Fight for Freedom

George Hill says he never wanted to be on stage. He's serving time for the attempted murder of a uniformed police officer. He's soft-spoken and stutters slightly, which makes him self-conscious about public speaking. However, in December of 1999, when one of his fellow inmates at Sing Sing Correctional was unable to play his part in the prison's production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, he asked Hill to fill in and he obliged.

The production was part of Hill's participation in RTA, or Rehabilitation Through the Arts, a group that allows prisoners to put on plays inside correctional facilities.

George says that in prison, there is a lot of pressure to act tough and maintain a strong image, but RTA has been part of his way to break free of that.

"In this environment, sometimes you have to act out so the individuals don't take advantage of you. But in this RTA program, we were able to do just the opposite. We were able to be someone else without being ridiculed," Hill said, seated in the waiting room at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in October where he's currently incarcerated.

This is one of the many volunteer programs that Hill has participated in over his 28 years of incarceration.

When he was 19 years old, George Hill was given a 20 years to life prison sentence for shooting uniformed police officer Paul Freitas. He's already served 28 years of that sentence. During that time, he committed himself to becoming more selfless and emotionally aware. He's mentored men inside, obtained degrees up to his Masters and maintained a relationship with his large and loving family from the inside.

Despite Hill's personal reform behind bars, he's been denied seven times in the past eight years and the political nature of his crime makes it unclear whether there's anything Hill can do to sway the parole board in his favor.

His roles in prison plays have been mostly minor, but the toughest speaking parts for him are his performances in front of a state panel of parole commissioners. Each time, he must recount the night of his crime and demonstrate how he has changed.

THE CRIME

In the visiting room at Woodbourne Correctional Facility, Hill sits at a table in the visiting room, hands folded in front of him. Behind him is light blue wallpaper where incarcerated men and their loved ones pose for polaroid pictures on Saturdays during visiting hours.

Hill is broad shouldered and stands at six foot seven inches tall. Men inside call him “Face” a nickname short for “Baby face” because of his youthful appearance. Even though Hill has told this story many times, he seems nervous. The pace of his speech slows and he fidgets a bit.

In 1991 Hill was nineteen years old and on probation for a weapons charge when he was arrested for shooting and injuring NYPD officer Paul Freitas. The police officers stopped the car Hill was riding in on the corner of Park Place and Saratoga Avenue in Brooklyn. They had reason to believe the car was involved in a robbery. Hill jumped out of the car, hid behind a bush and opened fire at Freitas, non-fatally hitting the officer in the head, abdomen and leg and leaving him severely injured.

“When that police officer came around the corner, all I could think about was trying to get away. And I started firing in his direction, not with the intent to kill him or even harm him, but it was it was a conscious decision that I made to start firing that gun,” Hill said. Hill maintains that he didn’t even know that Freitas is hit.

Hill eventually surrendered and turned himself in, and was sentenced to a 20 years to life in prison for attempted murder. Officer Freitas retired on a disability pension at age 29, two years after the crime.

A TURNING POINT

When he was arrested at 19, he was in denial about the consequences of his crime, but about two years into his sentence he decided to continue his education. Hill had been a good student from early on, and had always thought he would go to college someday.

He also started working in [Transitional Services](#), a mandatory program that helps inmates prepare for a crime-free reentry into the community. He said he enjoyed being able to help people better themselves while inside.

Although he identified his work in Transitional Services as a turning point for him, his desire to help others to grow up and get out of prison didn’t stop there. He tutored men who wanted to get their GEDS and convinced some inmates to leave gangs. He worked in the law library and his parole packet contains letters from multiple inmates who he’s helped to win over the parole board.

He spent a lot of time helping younger men inside, but one of Hill’s closest friends in prison was Gregory Brown, who is 20 years older than he is. They met in 1993, when George was 21 years old and had just been transferred to Sing Sing two years into his sentence.

Brown prides himself on being a selective friend. "I wasn't the type of person that would just extend myself to anybody," he said.

But Brown says he was struck by Hill's maturity. He says that a lot of men who are incarcerated stagnate and focus on their pasts, but Hill wasn't like that. He noticed that George wanted to educate himself and stay aware of current events and history.

Although Hill knew the facts of his crime wouldn't change, he knew his temperament and outlook could. And even though Hill is much younger than Brown, soon he began giving Brown advice.

He encouraged Brown to take a "personal inventory" every day.

"He'd say, 'before you step out of your cell, two or three times a day, reflect on the things that are said to you and what you say to people, correct for errors,'" Brown said.

Brown also admires the way Hill expresses deep remorse for his crime. The first time Hill told Brown about the facts of his case, he broke down crying.

"I would tell him [Freitas] that after looking back on my life, and recognizing the harm that I've done that I didn't express that I know that he was doing the right thing. And I was doing the wrong thing out there. And what I've done to him should never have been done," Hill said. Hill says that when he became incarcerated he started learning how to be a man, but this didn't mean building up a tough, macho exterior. He began to set examples of how he could take responsibility for his actions and become more caring and selfless.

Although George isn't a father himself, he helps facilitate a support group called Conscious Fathers.

"I tell them how I conduct myself with my nieces and nephews. And this gets them to open up and that's what it really is with that, you know, getting men to open up and know that what they're saying is safe around us," Hill said

He has stayed connected with his 28 nieces and nephews, many of whom he's never met outside a prison waiting room.

He hopes to help young people if he's released through a position as a youth specialist with the Administration for Children's Services. While listening to a radio program he heard an ACS advertisement calling for mentors for at-risk youth. He sent a letter to get more information, and a copy of the flyer to include in his parole packet.

"I know that I can affect change in the lives of the young men that are in those places because I know that they're making terrible decisions just like I was," Hill says. "It is my hope that I can catch them before they make that one decision that will cause them to end up in prison as long as I have been."

Although Hill is proud of what he's achieved during his time behind bars, he recognizes it came at a high cost.

“People encouraged me to talk more about it, but it is a difficult balancing act, you know, to say, Okay, I have these certifications. I have these degrees and knowing that I shot a police officer who was only doing his duty,” Hill said.

HIS LATEST PAROLE HEARING

At the time of his most recent parole hearing, in January of 2019, upon learning that Hill would be coming up for parole again, Freitas and his allies on the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association publically opposed his release.

On Jan. 5, 2019, just four days before Hill’s, [The New York Daily News](#) ran an article with the headline “Retired cop wounded by gunman in 1991 worried shooter will be paroled.” The article cited an undisclosed source who allegedly overheard parole commissioners Otis Cruse and Carol Shapiro saying that it was time for George to be released.

Cruse and Shapiro were both commissioners who supported the release of Herman Bell in 2018, another man convicted of shooting a police officer who was subsequently released on parole.

The article went viral, with leaders in the NYPD community posting about it on Twitter and Facebook, rallying behind Freitas to keep Hill behind bars. NYPD Chief Terence Monahan and Chief James R. Waters, NYPD Chief of Counterterrorism both shared the article. Monahan specifically stated that Hill should never be granted parole.

When George’s lawyers Bahar Ansari and Lauren Restivo saw the article, they were crestfallen. They’ve been working with him since December 2017 and with a packet full of letters of support and a Master’s degree from the Union Theological Seminary, they felt more hopeful than ever that he would be granted parole.

Hill hadn’t had a disciplinary infraction in four years and on his COMPAS Risk assessment, which is meant to judge whether an inmate will be likely to commit a crime once they are released, he scored unlikely or low in every category except for history of violence, which referred to the crime of which he was convicted.

“There was so much sort of hope going into this interview. His packet was prepared. He was feeling confident he was ready. To explain, everything that he had done to the commissioners, he was ready to talk about who he is today,” Ansari said. “You could just see the hope completely disappear from his face as soon as I told him,”

The lawyers and many of George’s family members maintained that it was impossible for George to have a fair hearing because two of the commissioners had the New York Daily News article accused them of acting improperly.

During the hearing, commissioner Shapiro was the one commissioner on the board of three who supported George’s release.

She's often been the lone dissenter in parole hearings. Although the New York state parole board is often staffed by commissioners with law enforcement backgrounds, but Shapiro is a self-proclaimed "raging liberal" who has a background in social work and advocacy for those involved in the criminal justice system.

She said that the parole board tends to focus on the nature of the crime and not necessarily how the person has changed or promises a decreased chance of reoffending once they are released.

Shapiro was legally unable to comment on the specifics of Hill's case, but she said that she sees a similar pattern in cases where the victim is a police officer. She says she sees many men with profiles similar to George's who appear before the board many times.

"For these people who are just denied, denied, denied parole, the crime is never going to change. And I felt that really wasn't fair to that person," Shapiro said.

And during Hill's hearing Shapiro commended him.

"A number of people get college degrees, but not very often do they recognize that this is a gift, an opportunity, and you also used it to learn about yourself a lot and I just wanted to recognize that," she said.

On the Saturday after George's parole hearing, Ansari decided to search Twitter. She knew that the decision was supposed to be sent to her in the next week and was anxiously awaiting an answer. It was there that she found a tweet from Mr. Freitas.

Freitas tweeted "Thank you for everyone's support. Yesterday I was informed George Hill was DENIED PAROLE. But is eligible in fourteen months."

Freitas had been informed of Hill's parole denial before Hill or his legal team did

Freitas did not respond to requests for comment.

"There was no even dignity in how we learned that he was denied parole, because somebody leaked the information. And then we probably a week later actually got the official decision saying that he was denied parole," Ansari said.

In the official decision letter from the NYS Department of Corrections and Supervision, which oversees parole wrote "There is reasonable probability that you would not live and remain at liberty without again violating the law, and your release would be incompatible and would be incompatible with the welfare of society and would so deprecate the serious nature of the crime as to undermine the respect of the law."

"The panel notes your personal growth and productive use of time, however, discretionary release shall not be granted merely as a reward for good conduct or efficient performance while

incarcerated. The instant offense was violent, heinous and shows a total disregard for human life.”

A representative from the DOCCS said that although there was a miscommunication in the parole board decision process but it was not illegal and thus was never investigated. The agency said that this kind of occurrence is rare and DOCCS would do its best to avoid it in the future.

Ansari and Restivo filed an appeal with the parole board on the grounds that George’s trial was unfair, but have yet to receive a response.

In an email, the PBA Communications Director Albert W. O’Leary wrote:

“Our president, Patrick J. Lynch, believes that anyone who intentionally kills or attempts to kill a uniformed police officer in the performance of his or her duty, forfeits his right to freedom. If you will shoot a police officer, you will shoot anyone. They are a danger to society. There may be a place for parole of someone convicted of minor crimes, but anyone who kills or tries to kill a police officer should be incarcerated for life.”

Hill knows his case is a political one. He said that he thinks that with the tight alliance of the PBA he knows he might never get a fair shot at freedom.

“You have parole commissioners who view you as if you're still that same individual that I was 28 years ago,” Hill said

Despite feeling that the police unions won’t ever forgive him, the way he views law enforcement has changed.

“I see them all as human beings, whether they're police officers or corrections officers, you know, and I do see them as authority figures, sometimes it gets a little difficult to accept what they're saying. I know that they are human beings, and they always deserve that respect that I didn't give when I was younger,” he said.

And as he prepares for his next parole appearance Hill and his legal team have gotten a few standing corrections officers to write letters in support of him.

in 2018 DOCCS started a program called the [Apology Letterbank](#), where inmates could submit letters of apology to their victims and the victims could choose to view them.

Hill said his apology letter took eight months to write.

He said it took so long because he had so much he wanted to say and often struggles with balancing descriptions of his accomplishments with acknowledgment that his reformation inside came at a major cost.

“There is a part of that that makes me feel that I was like gloating, but not meaning to gloat about what I've done, because I know that it came at the expense of harming him and nearly causing his death,” Hill said.

He cut the letter down from eight pages to four and a half before submitting it to the apology bank. He has no way of knowing whether Freitas has read it.

FUTURE PLANS

After his parole denial, Hill was transferred from Sing Sing, a high security prison, to Woodbourne, which is medium security. The lawyers said that this can be a good sign, suggesting that internal proceedings at DOCCS have recognized that Hill is more equipped to reenter society.

Hill's lawyers hope that Brooklyn's District Attorney Eric Gonzalez's creation of a [Post-Conviction Justice Bureau](#) and promise to crack down on long sentences will help people like George get paroled.

In September, Gonzalez said that in some cases where the victim is a police officer, the parole denials are a political statement.

“It's not a statement of public safety, it's a political statement that some lives are more important than others.”

Restivo and Ansari have reached out to Gonzalez for a letter in Hill's favor, but they have not yet received a response.

Despite repeated denials, Hill remains hopeful.

“If my ancestors can live in slavery their entire life hoping to be freed one day and never being free then I can finish this time myself because it's not gonna be my entire life,” Hill said.

His family also helps him maintain hope. And although they know the past 28 years have been hard, they say he's upbeat when they speak to him on the phone. George is one of seven siblings and many of them live in Brooklyn.

His mother Roberta Hill, who is 81 years old, has created an apartment in the finished basement of her house, where she hopes George will stay if he's released.

“She said that she always wanted to take a family picture but never got around to it. And that's what I want to have before she passes away,” Hill said.

