

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

---

Fall 12-18-2020

### Seeking Clemency: A Profile on Jacob Rouse

Jocelyn A. Contreras

*Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism*

Sarah Gabrielli

*Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj\\_etds/438](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/438)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

Jacob Rouse was 18 years old when he drove the getaway car that would define the rest of his life. He sat in his blue Ford Taurus, waiting to drive his three friends away from the scene of a robbery in Rochester, New York. Jacob was parked about a block away when one of his accomplices shot and killed 22-year-old Herschel Scriven, a local youth pastor and church organist.

Rouse was a high school graduate at the time of the crime. He had no prior criminal record. He was enrolled in college and Reserve Officers Training Course (ROTC).

When the police took him in for questioning, Rouse told them everything.

On TUESDAY on November 28, 2006 Rouse was sentenced to 22-years-to-life for second-degree murder. The conviction was for “felony murder,” meaning he was actively committing a felony while a murder occurred, by someone else’s hand.

Growing up as a young black man in a predominantly white town was a challenge for Rouse. He was raised by his single, white mother, Elizabeth Uzoaru. His father, who is Black, was never around, which left Jacob to himself to answer the question: what will make me a man?

“I looked at black people that I felt were manly,” said Jacob. He turned to representations in television and movies. He saw men who abused women, who employed violent behavior.

“That’s what I thought a man was.”

The night he decided to drive the getaway car he says he was trying to prove something to himself: That he was man enough to drive that car.

It was an act that has filled him with remorse and regret. Had the gun been in his hands, he believes he would have never pulled the trigger. But that changes nothing.

“An innocent man was brutally murdered because of my involvement,” said Rouse, “I still see my role, my participation in it, and I see the blood that was shed because of my actions.

At his sentencing hearing, Rouse made a vow to Herschel Scriven’s mother: That he would continue her son’s work as a Christian community leader.

“She said, ‘I’m going to hold you to that,’ and I’ll never forget those words,” Rouse said. “I look at the community here, too. If I can help affect one person’s life for the better. That’s what I try to do. Give somebody time, you know, give somebody a kind word.”

Rouse spent the first decade of his sentence at Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York. While there, he began to participate in weekly church services and bible studies, mentor youth in a program called ‘A Look for Alternatives’ (ALFA), and take classes at Genesee Community College.

In 2016, he transferred to Elmira in New York’s southern tier. This year, Rouse is applying for clemency, or relief, from his lengthy prison sentence.

In New York State, Governor Andrew Cuomo has the unbounded power to grant clemency, but he has only ever exercised this for 24 cases over ten years in office. Rouse

hopes his accolades will set him apart from the thousands of rejected applications each year.

At both Attica and Elmira, Rouse earned his way onto Honor Block and, according to his disciplinary records, he never incurred a single disciplinary ticket. He received his Associate's Degree from Genesee Community College, with a 4.0 GPA, and is currently enrolled in classes at Cornell University.

Rouse's application includes a letter of support from Raymond Coveny, a retired Superintendent from Elmira Correctional Facility. "I will do everything within my power to assist with Jacob's eligibility for Executive Clemency. I think his 'track record,' while incarcerated, speaks for itself," Coveny writes.

"I'm confident that, upon release, he will spend every day aware of what he owes to his community and working to become an asset to that community," writes Doran Larson, one of Rouse's professors from Genesee. "He knows that he did wrong and he does not attempt to mitigate his responsibility by claiming (what is true) that he was not the direct perpetrator of the crime."

Statements from the victim's family are missing from the application, though Rouse's attorneys have attempted to contact them.

His good work behind bars, however, hasn't eased the pain for the Scriven family. "To us, Clemency for Jacob represents a disregard for what happened to Herschel," said Herschel's sister Denise Scriven-McFadden, speaking for her family. "It doesn't matter that [Jacob] didn't pull the trigger, he was a part of a plan that led to Herschel's demise."

However, in the fourteen years since Herschel's death, those that crossed paths with Jacob in the prison system all say the same thing about him. He is exceptional.

According to former inmate Anthony Yarbough, Rouse was also an exceptional friend. He would listen to his friends' problems, and support them, in a way unlike anyone else in Attica.

"People don't do that in prison. They don't talk to you about your situation because they're worried about their own situation," he said. If he was ever low on funds, Yarbough remembers Jacob's generosity.

"He would go to commissary and pick some stuff up for me and never asked for anything in return," said Yarbough.

At a Christian festival at Attica in 2014, Jacob met the sister of a fellow incarcerated person. Samantha Lewis was visiting her brother Robert, who was also serving time in the facility.

One of the first things Lewis noticed about him was his capacity for remorse and emotional honesty. They began to exchange letters.

"He didn't hold anything back, he took full responsibility and showed such great remorse and compassion," Lewis said. "That was part of the reason that I fell in love with him, that he wasn't afraid to talk about, you know, the mistakes that he'd made."

The next year, Lewis started a blog called “The House That Rouse Built.” It is filled with poems and personal essays by both of them. In one section, they each write about their “perspectives” on their love story.

“She rescued me. She pulled me out of a dreary slumber,” Rouse writes about the beginning of their life together.

Rouse and Samantha Lewis eventually married on April 25, 2015, and Rouse became stepdad to Lewis’ two boys Caleb and Deegan, ages 11 and 12.

“[Jacob] is very, very good with children,” Lewis said. During family visits, in the years before the pandemic, he would teach the kids bible verses, sing songs, play card games and teach them chess. The boys call him “Jakey” and sometimes even “dad.”

“Over time we kind of realized he’s now part of our family,” Caleb said of his step dad.

When asked what he misses most about “Jakey” Deegan giggles. “How funny he was,” he says. “The first thing he would say on the phone is tell us a joke.”

The family bonded during weekly visitation and conjugal visits: overnight stays in a trailer on prison property. Their four became five in 2018, when Lewis gave birth to their daughter, Sophia. Now almost 3 years old, Sophia has short bouncing curls, big eyes and a sweet little singing voice.

All of which, according to Lewis, Sophia gets from her dad. “She’s such a little lover like her dad,” she adds.

Lewis and the kids live in Northern Pennsylvania, only about a 20-minute drive away from Elmira. They used to make the short trip to see him every week but in-person visits were suspended due to COVID-19 outbreaks. Rouse has not seen his family in person for almost 250 days.

There have been over 600 confirmed Coronavirus cases within Elmira's incarcerated population. In late October, Rouse tested positive for the virus. He went into quarantine for two weeks which, in prison, looks a lot like solitary confinement.

"Not being able to see each other, not being able to touch one another, it's been very difficult. When that is all you have to express your love and maintain strong family bonds," said Rouse.

During confinement, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, he was only allowed 30 minutes to either use the phone, take a shower, or send an email. With such limited contact during the pandemic, Rouse worries that his children will forget about him.

"I know he's trying to do the best he can with email and telephone conversations. But that's about all he has," Lewis said.

"Unfortunately, you know, I can't be there and being over the phone is not adequate support," said Rouse.

Last year, Lewis was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma and without Rouse by her side, Lewis says chemotherapy is not an option for her right now.

“When you’re trying to take care of a household, and three kids and finances and everything else on your own, you really don’t have much time left,” Lewis said. “If Jacob were to come home, we might reevaluate the treatment options.”

Her doctors are not supportive of Lewis’ decision to refuse treatment. However, she is a woman of faith: faith that Rouse will be home soon, and that holistic treatment (meditation, acupuncture, supplements) will buy her enough time until then.

Additionally, Lewis must be an advocate for her oldest son Deegan. He suffers from a life threatening genetic and metabolic disease called pyruvate dehydrogenase complex (PDC) deficiency. The disease requires constant supervision and medical attention.

The medical problems facing his family have made his wish to be released all the more urgent. “I want to be able to help my children or help homeschool my daughter and my son. I want to be able to take Deegan to his appointments. God forbid he has to be rushed to the hospital,” he said.

The rest of Rouse’s family lives about two hours from Elmira in Rochester. His grandparents, Ralph and Jane Dintruff, have not been able to visit him since the transfer from Attica. At 87 and 86 years old, they say they cannot handle the 120-mile drive.

“You think, well 10 years, that’s nothing. I’m not going to be here at 97,” said his grandfather, Dintruff, when asked about Jacob’s 22-to-life prison sentence. “That is what ten years means to me, or 96 here,” he said, indicating his wife.

As a retired teacher, Dintruff’s “secret wish” is for his grandson to use his background to teach others about the impact of life-altering decisions.



“It’s invaluable, if he could pass that on to other people. Because he’s lived that experience. And he could make one hell of a fine teacher in my book,” Dintruff says.

Rouse’s personal career goal is to become a youth counselor. “I would love to teach nonviolent communication to at-risk youth,” he says.

Camille Zitz, Jacob’s oldest sister, also works in education as a vice principal. She agrees that her brother has a higher purpose as an educator.

“He has a great story and a great heart. I think he could do a lot for the community,” Zitz said. “I have some connections at a couple of different colleges, and I know that we could find a way for him to be impactful.”

If Jacob Rouse is ever released from prison, he will have a much wider network than when he first got there.

On the inside, he has touched the lives of fellow inmates, mentees, and correctional officers — some even vow to help bring him home. He has developed more intimate relationships with distant family, through letters and phone calls, than ever seemed possible in his youth.

Most importantly for Rouse, in a small town in Pennsylvania, just past the high school and the football field and the duck pond, he has a wife and three children that need him.