



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Public Safety



PAROLE BOARD

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DECISION

IN THE MATTER OF

JOLI SPARKMAN

F36723

TYPE OF HEARING: Review Hearing

DATE OF HEARING: June 10, 2014

DATE OF DECISION: September 5, 2014

PARTICIPATING BOARD MEMBERS: Dr. Charlene Bonner, Tonomey Coleman, Sheila Dupre, Ina Howard-Hogan, Tina Hurley, Lucy Soto-Abbe, Josh Wall

DECISION OF THE BOARD: After careful consideration of all relevant facts, including the nature of the underlying offense, institutional record, the testimony of the inmate at the hearing, and the views of the public as expressed at the hearing or in written submissions to the Board, we conclude by a unanimous vote that the inmate is a suitable candidate for parole. Parole is granted to a long term residential program after one year in lower security at the Department of Correction (DOC), during which time, Joli Sparkman must maintain good conduct and comply with all DOC expectations for programs, activities, and employment.

I. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On March 30, 1999 in Hampden Superior Court, Joli Sparkman pleaded guilty to second degree murder and was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole at fifteen years. She also pleaded guilty to firearms offenses and received short concurrent sentences that have expired. The victim of this offense was Sherwood Gray, age 31.

Sparkman had two codefendants. Gerald Cobham pleaded guilty to manslaughter and received a term of 6 to 8 years. He was paroled on July 8, 2003, to an immigration detainer and was deported to Jamaica. His period of parole ended on May 21, 2005, and he was discharged from supervision. Derrick Ellis pleaded guilty to second degree murder and was sentenced to life with the possibility of parole. He was denied parole after his initial hearing on July 17, 2012 and was given a three year review. He has an order of deportation to Jamaica.

Sparkman and her two co-defendants, Cobham and Ellis, were drinking alcohol on the night of August 6, 1997, and into the early hours of the next morning at the Red Lion Cafe in Springfield. Sparkman was romantically involved with Gerald Cobham; Derrick Ellis and Gerald Cobham are cousins. They decided to rob somebody and Sparkman suggested they target Sherwood Gray, an acquaintance.

Sparkman arranged to meet with Mr. Gray, and she drove with him to a planned location while Cobham and Ellis followed them. The plan was for Sparkman to distract Mr. Gray so that Ellis could approach the car undetected. Mr. Gray, however, noticed Ellis approaching the car. Upon being noticed, Ellis fired two shots at close range. Both shots entered Sherwood Gray's upper left back, traveled through his torso, and penetrated several internal organs causing massive hemorrhage and death.

It was approximately one month later that police arrested Sparkman and her co-defendants. Sparkman gave police numerous versions of the events on August 7, 1997.

II. PAROLE HEARING ON JUNE 10, 2014

Joli Sparkman was represented by Attorney Pamela Lindmark. At the hearing, Sparkman delivered an opening statement expressing her remorse to the family for her crime and the loss of life. Sparkman provided the Board with a detailed account of her crime and the path she has taken in her rehabilitation. Sparkman discussed her continued efforts in addressing her identified areas of need and informed the Board what she has accomplished throughout her incarceration and since her last hearing.

Sparkman has continued to demonstrate good conduct and provided examples of how she has utilized her skill set to refrain from engaging in negative behaviors. Sparkman has received positive reports from institutional staff, including her mental health counselor and the program coordinator for the American Vet Dogs Prison Program. By all accounts, she appears to have incorporated her years of rehabilitation into her everyday life.

Sparkman has completed several programs including Correctional Recovery Academy and its Graduate Maintenance Program, Victims of Violence, Domestic Violence Reduction, and Healthy Relationships. In addition, she earned a Bachelor of Liberal Studies from Boston University and a license in cosmetology. She is a member of Sigma Alpha Lambda a National Leadership and Honors Organization. Sparkman continues to participate in programs, and expressed significant benefits from being a trainer with the Vet Dog Program. She reported graduating two dogs and how beneficial the process has been to her own rehabilitation. Sparkman is also a mentor to other inmates and continues to participate in Buddhist groups.

Sparkman demonstrated a commitment to her mental health treatment as well, and has no longer has any acute treatment needs. While Sparkman continues to receive counseling and medication, she has reported that she has progressed to a position where she now mentors and works with inmates who struggle with mental illnesses. Sparkman presented as insightful about her own mental health needs and ready to continue her treatment in a less restrictive setting. Such progress was also documented in her letter of support by her counselor.

Sparkman seeks parole to a long term residential program, with participation in mental health treatment through the Department of Mental Health (DMH). She would obtain employment, and attend AA/NA meetings. She would also use her established community network and her family to provide her with emotional and spiritual support. Sparkman reported a strong support system of family and friends that would be able to assist her with her re-entry needs.

Hampden Assistant District Attorney Howard Safford spoke in opposition to parole. Springfield Police Commissioner William Fitchet wrote a letter opposing parole. Members of Sherwood Gray's family submitted letters opposing parole. Five supporters, including Sparkman's father, her two sons, and a friend, spoke in support of parole.

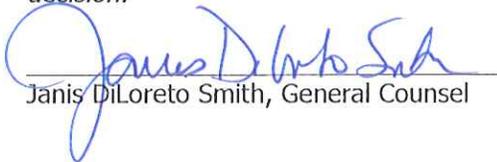
III. DECISION

Joli Sparkman appeared for her initial parole hearing in 2012 after serving 17 years of a life sentence for felony murder. Because Sparkman did not shoot Sherwood Gray and did not have an intent to kill him, the four goals of sentencing – punishment, deterrence, public protection, and rehabilitation – can be attained more directly if the inmate is committed and focused on reform. Sparkman followed the Board's recommendations from the 2012 decision and has continued to commit herself to rehabilitation. She has benefitted greatly from rehabilitative work and presents no current risk for violence. She has established a release plan that will enable her to continue necessary treatment and become a successful, productive member of society.

The standard applied in assessing candidates for parole is set out in 120 CMR 300.04, which provides that "[P]arole Board Members shall only grant a parole permit if they are of the opinion that there is a reasonable probability that, if such offender is released, the offender will live and remain at liberty without violating the law and that release is not incompatible with the welfare of society." Applying that appropriately high standard, we find by a unanimous decision that Ms. Sparkman does merit parole. Parole is granted to a long term residential program after one year in lower security.

SPECIAL CONDITIONS: Parole after one year in lower security to a long term residential program; no drug use; no alcohol use; mental health evaluation and must follow recommended mental health treatment plan; GPS monitoring for 1 year, then at Parole Officer discretion.

I certify that this is the decision and reasons of the Massachusetts Parole Board regarding the above referenced hearing. Pursuant to G.L. c. 127, § 130, I further certify that all voting Board Members have reviewed the applicant's entire criminal record. This signature does not indicate authorship of the decision.


Janis DiLoreto Smith, General Counsel

9/5/14

Date