



Charles D. Baker
Governor

Karyn Polito
Lieutenant Governor

Daniel Bennett
Secretary

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security

PAROLE BOARD

12 Mercer Road
Natick, Massachusetts 01760

Telephone # (508) 650-4500
Facsimile # (508) 650-4599



Paul M. Treseler
Chairperson

Michael J. Callahan
Executive Director

DECISION

IN THE MATTER OF

BRETT CHRISTIANSON

W63314

TYPE OF HEARING: Review Hearing

DATE OF HEARING: January 5, 2016

DATE OF DECISION: April 4, 2016

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

DECISION OF THE BOARD: After careful consideration of all relevant facts, including the nature of the underlying offense, the age of the inmate at the time of offense, criminal record, institutional record, the inmate's testimony at the hearing, and the views of the public as expressed at the hearing or in written submissions to the Board, we conclude that the inmate is not a suitable candidate for parole. Parole is denied with a review scheduled in three years from the date of the hearing.¹

I. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On September 24, 1997, in Suffolk Superior Court, Brett Christianson pled guilty to arson and to the second degree murder of Nordella Newson. Mr. Christianson was sentenced to life in prison, with the possibility of parole, for the murder of Ms. Newson. Mr. Christianson was also sentenced to a consecutive term in prison of not more than 15 years, and not less than 12 years, for his conviction of arson.

Prior to her death, Ms. Newson had employed Mr. Christianson to run errands for her. However, in the month preceding Ms. Newson's murder, Mr. Christianson had stolen approximately \$500 from her apartment. On the evening of March 27, 1996, Ms. Newson was home alone in her apartment, located in the South End neighborhood of Boston. At

¹ Six of the seven Members of the Parole Board voted to schedule a review hearing on Mr. Christianson's petition for parole in three years. One Board Member voted to schedule a review hearing in two years.

approximately 9:00 p.m., the buzzer in Ms. Newson's apartment was activated, indicating someone at the apartment building's front door was attempting to gain entry into the premises. Ms. Newson opened the front door to her apartment but then closed it when no one was there. Sometime thereafter, Mr. Christianson entered Ms. Newson's apartment with the intent of robbing her.

After entering her apartment, Mr. Christianson attempted to subdue Ms. Newson in order to carry out the robbery. When Ms. Newson resisted, Mr. Christianson placed his hand over her mouth and strangled her. In the ensuing struggle, Ms. Newson suffered blunt force trauma to her head and a punctured lung when Mr. Christianson stabbed her in the chest. Before fleeing the scene, Mr. Christianson set fire to Ms. Newson's apartment. When she was discovered by neighbors attempting to save her, post mortem burns and soot marks were visible on Ms. Newson's body. At the time of her murder, Ms. Newson was 85-years-old.

II. PAROLE HEARING ON JANUARY 5, 2016

Brett Christianson, now 56-years-old, appeared before the Parole Board on January 5, 2016 for a review hearing. Mr. Christianson's initial appearance before the Board, in August 2011, resulted in the denial of parole. In Mr. Christianson's opening statement to the Board, he apologized for his actions. During the course of his hearing, Mr. Christianson spoke about the circumstances precipitating the murder of Ms. Newson. He first became acquainted with Ms. Newson in 1988, when they both lived in the same apartment building. Shortly thereafter, Ms. Newson employed Mr. Christianson to assist her with household chores and shopping. Mr. Christianson admitted to the Board that he took advantage of her because she was elderly.

In 1991, Mr. Christianson began to steal from Ms. Newson. The thefts continued until her death in 1996, and were something Ms. Newson was aware of, but which nonetheless went unreported to police. Ms. Newson was also aware that Mr. Christianson abused drugs and alcohol, as she had seen him intoxicated on prior occasions. According to Mr. Christianson, he was under the influence of alcohol at the time he killed Ms. Newson, but he had not used drugs that day. Mr. Christianson admitted, however, that at the time he killed Ms. Newson, he used crack cocaine daily.

On the day of Ms. Newson's death, Mr. Christianson had gone to her apartment to get money. Mr. Christianson explained to the Board that he became enraged after Ms. Newson denied him entry to her apartment, shutting the door in his face. Mr. Christianson described himself as being at the "end of my rope" and that the door being shut in his face was "the last straw." According to Mr. Christianson, he pushed the door open, forced his way into the apartment, and immediately attacked Ms. Newson by striking her on the side of the head. Ms. Newson fell into his arms after momentarily losing consciousness. Mr. Christianson laid Ms. Newson down on the floor, near the kitchen table, and asked her where her money was. Ms. Newson told Mr. Christianson that there was no money in the apartment. Finding this response to be incredible, Mr. Christianson went to the bedroom and looked for the money "in the usual place." When he found none, Mr. Christianson returned to the kitchen and stabbed Ms. Newson repeatedly. Ms. Newson, however, did not die from the stab wounds. According to Mr. Christianson, Ms. Newson did not die until after he strangled her. Subsequently, Mr. Christianson set the apartment on fire.

Upon inquiry by the Board, Mr. Christianson explained that he felt he had to stab Ms. Newson to cover up the crimes he had already committed, specifically breaking into Ms. Newson's apartment and striking her on the side of the head. Mr. Christianson also told the Board that, although he was not sure that Ms. Newson was dead at the time the apartment was set on fire, he both believed and hoped that she was. Mr. Christianson further explained to the Board that he did not light the fire to get the attention of authorities who could provide assistance to Ms. Newson (as he had reported to the Board at his last parole hearing). Rather, Mr. Christianson admitted that his sole motive for setting Ms. Newson's apartment on fire was to destroy the evidence of his crimes.

When questioned by the Board, Mr. Christianson cited the sexual abuse and domestic violence he experienced in his youth as factors contributing to his criminal behavior. Mr. Christianson also discussed his substance abuse and prior treatment for depression. When Mr. Christianson began serving his sentence for the murder of Ms. Newson, all of these issues were pertinent in his life. Mr. Christianson, however, agreed with the Board's assessment that his participation in programming over the course of his incarceration has been minimal. Mr. Christianson, nonetheless, expressed his belief to the Board that he was rehabilitated. He also expressed his desire to participate in programming. Specifically, Mr. Christianson discussed his intent to participate in Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA) if he were granted parole. According to Mr. Christianson, he previously participated in AA/NA from 1997 to 2001, but stopped when he felt that he had benefitted as much as he could from the program. Mr. Christianson, however, also told the Board that he recognized the benefits of programs such as AA/NA could be continuous and expressed his willingness to participate in any programming the Board might suggest.

Suffolk County Assistant District Attorney Charles Bartoloni spoke in opposition to Mr. Christianson's release on parole. The Board did not receive any testimony in support of Mr. Christianson's petition for parole.

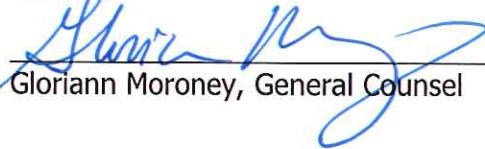
III. DECISION

The Board is of the opinion that Mr. Christianson has not demonstrated a level of rehabilitative progress that would make his release compatible with the welfare of society. The Board believes a longer period of positive institutional adjustment and programming would be beneficial to Mr. Christianson's rehabilitation.

The applicable standard used by the Board to assess a candidate for parole is: "Parole 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." 120 C.M.R. 300.04. In forming this opinion, the Board has taken into consideration Mr. Christianson's institutional behavior as well as his participation in available work, educational, and treatment programs during the period of his incarceration. The Board has also considered whether risk reduction programs could effectively minimize Mr. Christianson's risk of recidivism. After applying this standard to the circumstances of Mr. Christianson's case, the Board is of the unanimous opinion that Mr. Christianson is not yet rehabilitated and, therefore, does not merit parole at this time.

Mr. Christianson's next appearance before the Board will take place in three years from the date of this hearing. During the interim, the Board encourages Mr. Christianson to continue working towards his full rehabilitation.

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.



Gloriann Moroney, General Counsel

4/4/16
Date