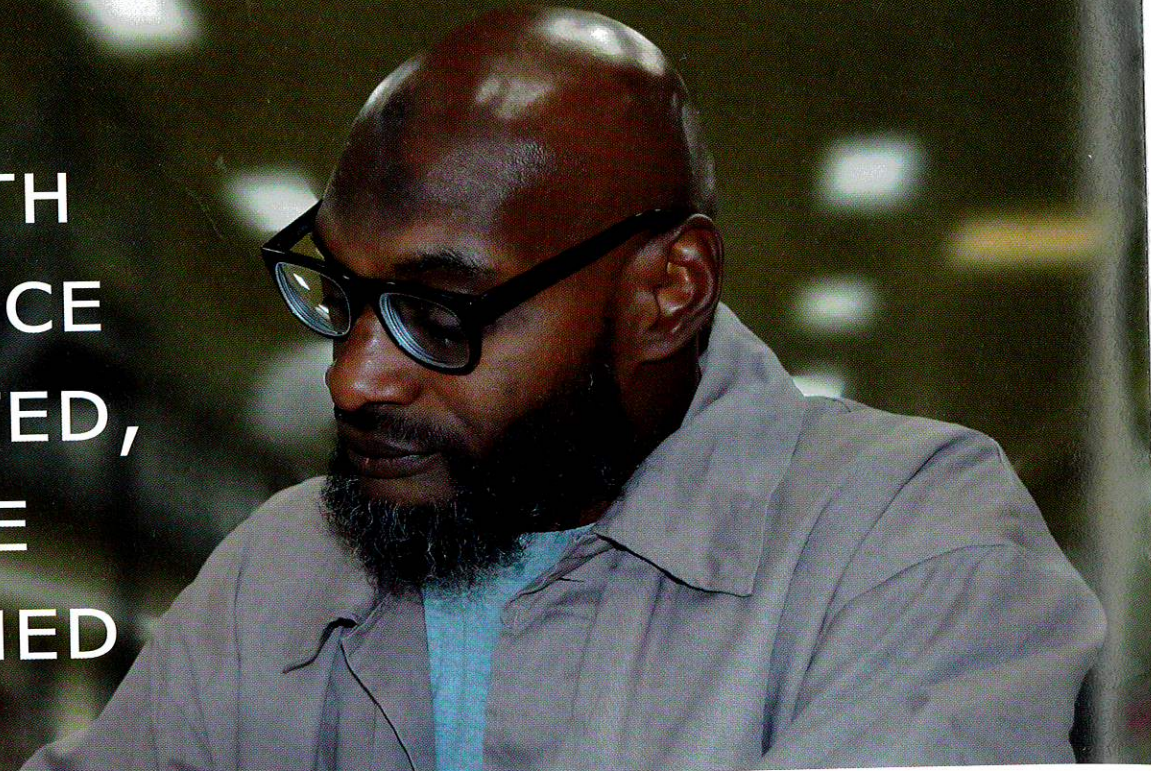


A DEATH SENTENCE COMMUTED, A LIFE REDEEMED



BY TIMOTHY JOHNSON

WHEN ELRICO Fowler was a child, he dreamed of becoming a pilot. That dream crashed when he got lost in the swirling storm of the street life. Sentenced to die by the state of North

Carolina, a new dream came alive within him—the dream to redeem his life by doing as much good as possible.

After a trial where he was convicted of murder and robbery, then sentenced to death, he arrived at Central Prison (CP) in Raleigh and walked into North Carolina's Death Row on the night of November 14, 1997. Twenty-seven years later, Fowler left "The Row." On December 31, 2024, then-North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper used his last day in office to commute the sentences of 15 men from death to life.

Like everyone who entered Death Row, Fowler received a guideline, "You better get two things: a Bible or Qur'an and a law book." He explained, "With the law book you can learn to fight for your life and freedom, and with the Bible or Qur'an you can prepare to die."

He was prepared for both struggles, describing himself as a "believing and practicing Muslim and bibliophile."

"I began reading before five years old; my mother instilled a love of reading into me," Fowler said. She took him on regular visits to a Charlotte public library, which supplied him with books on the expanse of subjects that interested him: history, science, political science, and aviation. "Even when I was in the streets, I went to the library to get books and do research. I can't help it. I just have to know," he said.

On The Row, books became his "friends and means of escape." His love of reading stimulated his growth and opened a path to doing good. "I know that education is the foundation of radical change," he said. "Education is the best reformer. It doesn't matter if it's religious, in which one learns spirituality and ethics, or secular, in which one learns what improves their temporal life." He believes religious and secular education work in partnership to make a person whole.

He credits The Row's "multi-racial environment," where everyone helped each other, for fostering his growth focus. "The Muslim community wrapped their arms around me," he said. "The Christians showed me that, although I was Muslim, I was still their little brother. And the other men embraced me."

The men shared a unifying characteristic that transcended skin color or religion. "We all wore the same color—red—every day," he said. "We became closer to each other than to our own families because of the time and circumstances that we endured together for decades."

While on The Row, Fowler encountered a staff psychologist dedicated to providing the men on Death Row with both academic and therapeutic programs that facilitated their mental health and personal growth. "Dr. Peter Kuhns is one of the best, most sincere men I've ever met," Fowler said. "He extremely cared for and advocated for our mental health."

Thanks to Dr. Kuhns and his staff, Fowler participated in a long list of programs and classes: Hidden Voices, Toastmasters, philosophy, social psychology, journaling, art and drama therapy, beginners and advanced yoga, and debate. "They helped bring light to the darkness of Death Row," Fowler said. "It even

appeared as if the fluorescent-lighted hallways became brighter."

One of the first classes he took was Writing from Captivity, a creative writing class taught by Duke professors and students. Fowler and his classmates learned to tell their stories through impactful writing.

The drama group put on several plays, including *Twelve Angry Men*, in which jurors angrily debate a verdict. Fowler played the judge. He and the other actors in the troupe didn't have as much acting experience as Jimmy Stewart, who performed the lead role in the original movie version, but their personal experience with courtrooms and verdicts gave their play the kind of raw emotion that wins Tony Awards for professional stage actors.

He said Hidden Voices was the "most profound program" he participated in. Founded by Lynden Harris, this program worked with residents of The Row to tell their stories in their own words. "This program brought full circle the saying, 'You are either part of the solution, or you are part of the problem,'" he said. He chose to be part of the solution by using his voice to change the way the public perceives people sentenced to death.

Participating in these programs gave Fowler the confidence to mentor men who came to Death Row after him. He told them, "Our mothers didn't give birth to monsters, even if we did monstrous things," he said. "We don't have to live and die as monsters. The door of repentance and reformation is open until it's closed by death."

Also, he partnered with his Muslim brothers to create a newsletter, *Al-Qalam*, which is Arabic for "the pen." The publication gave voice to incarcerated Muslims, first on North Caroli-

Photos by Michael Sutton

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na's Death Row, then expanded to other states. Fowler said, "Just because we were Muslims on Death Row didn't mean that our voices and actions had to be dead."

In late November 2024, Fowler had a dream where he returned to his room and found most of his property gone. "It was as if someone had packed up the vast majority of my books, legal papers, and cosmetics and left me with just enough to fill one property bag." He interpreted the dream as a message to prepare to leave by downsizing and packing. "Some guys even laughed at me. I was so confident of that dream," he said. While preparing his belongings, he also prepared mentally to transition to general population at another prison.

A month later, he was called to visitation, where his attorney informed him that his sentence had been commuted from death to life.

Returning to The Row, he did a "victory lap" through the pods to share the news with his closest friends. His friends celebrated by giving him repeated hugs and handshakes. Then, he made brief phone calls and sent messages to his family and supporters.

But his joy was tempered. "I was overcome with a sense of melancholy because of survivor's guilt," he rationalized. "There are many men who are just as worthy of relief, or even more so, than myself. Whatever I do now is not just for me, it is for my brothers." Carrying them with him in his heart and prayers, his goal is to represent those deserving men well, so they will receive the same opportunity to experience life after Death Row.

After saying goodbyes, he left the life and friends he had known for decades. He exchanged his jumpsuit for brown pants and a gray t-shirt. "It was weird getting used to wearing pants after all those decades wearing a red jumpsuit," he acknowledged.

Shedding that red death shroud, Fowler fixed his determination on using the life lessons he learned on The Row. He believes he and the others whose sentences were commuted have a duty to the incarcerated community. "We have to be the exemplars of the men that we have to live around now, especially the young men," he said. "We have to inspire them with our experiences, so when they are released, they won't return into the situation that we just escaped from. So, we have a very heavy responsibility."

When Fowler left CP in January 2025, he was sent to Richmond Correctional Institution. He was helped during this transition from Death Row to general population by familiar faces from The Row and by his Muslim community.

Walking to breakfast the morning after he arrived at Richmond, he stared up at the pre-dawn sky, mesmerized by the stars. He had not been outside while it was dark since before coming to prison. Standing in the chow hall line, he was still thinking about seeing the night sky when someone stepped out of line and turned to him. Fowler recognized a friend who left The Row several years earlier.

They reminisced and shared updates about mutual friends. "You couldn't break us apart, 'cause we done experienced something together," he explained. "And I needed that right there; I needed that connection with family. It's like a direct relative. He gave me some strength. He just don't know how much strength he gave me to go forward."

The Muslim community at Richmond also strengthened him. "Everything was foreign to me, so I had a lot to learn," he said. "I was immediately absorbed into the Muslim community. My brothers helped me."

While some changes were difficult, like sleeping on a bunk in an open dorm with people moving around him all the time, one change

invigorated him. He experienced his first contact visit. "I hadn't touched my family since January '96. I was able to hold my mom and sister, able to smell them and kiss them," he expressed, then breathed deeply, relishing the bouquet of the memory.

After only a month at Richmond, he transferred to Nash. He didn't want to leave Richmond, where he was close to his family in Charlotte and had found community with other Muslims and men from his hometown.

The resilience he built from overcoming the hardships of Death Row enabled him to immediately look for the positives in the change. First, he enjoyed the ride that gave him a chance to see parts of North Carolina he had never seen. Then, at Nash, he settled in and got busy.

From May to July, he completed the five tests for a high school equivalency diploma. He had wanted to accomplish that while on Death Row, but it was not an option, because administrators believed those resources would be wasted on someone awaiting execution.

Next, he took a creative writing class, The Art of Story Telling. He wants to write stories that highlight the injustices of the death penalty system and the humanity of the people sentenced to die for their crimes. He wants people in and out of prison to know, "We are redeemable."

Fowler never learned to fly planes across the skies, but he did learn to soar above the swirling storms of living on North Carolina's Death Row. Now, he's dedicating his life to doing good.

He spent decades close to death, losing brothers to execution and awaiting his own date. That experience shapes his perspective on life and death. "It makes me appreciate the life that I have at this moment. It motivates me to try to become the best man that I can, to do the most good that I can, before death overtakes me."

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