Del Prete Released From Prison

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A prisoner no longer, Del Prete reunites with her family on the other side

Jennifer Del Prete and her daughter Tia walk toward the entrance of Cracker Barrel Country Store shortly after being released from prison. (Annabel Edwards/The Medill Justice Project)

By Lauryn Schroeder
The Medill Justice Project

LINCOLN, Ill.—At 4:29 p.m. on a sun-dappled Wednesday, Jennifer Del Prete walked through the metal prison doors into the embrace of her daughter in a moment that has been nearly a decade in the making.

"It's really you," said her daughter Tia, 24, as she hugged her mother.

"It's really me," Del Prete responded, her eyes flooding with tears as she embraced her daughter and then sister and brother-in-law.
After serving nearly a decade in prison for a murder she said she didn’t commit, Del Prete walked out of Logan Correctional Center in Lincoln, Ill., more than 10 years before her scheduled parole in 2025. After sustaining two broken noses in prison, Del Prete emerged with little signs of wear, a petite woman in gray sweat shorts, a white T-shirt and big smile.

Del Prete, 43, was accused of shaking a 3 ½-month-old infant to death on Dec. 27, 2002, at a daycare in the Chicago suburb of Romeoville. She was sentenced to 20 years in 2005.

Last week, in what he called a “rare” ruling, U.S. District Court Judge Matthew F. Kennelly ordered Del Prete be released from prison after posting bond while the courts address her claims, which could take years. Kennelly signed off on her release today, surprising Del Prete and her family.

“I think I’m still in shock, that I’m going to wake up from this amazing dream,” Del Prete said.

“I can’t believe it’s finally happening,” said Del Prete’s sister, Summer Neal, who had already planned a trip to visit her sister today but was not expecting to take her home.

When Del Prete got word about her release, a room full of inmates stood and clapped. As her family carried away two small boxes containing her only possessions, Del Prete waved goodbye to the group of prison officers who had stayed late to congratulate her. She sighed in relief and began planning her first moments of freedom, which included a trip to the Cracker Barrel Old Country Store for dinner just minutes from the prison.

As Del Prete enjoyed using metal—not plastic—silverware to eat a steak for the first time since 2005, she talked about possibly going to college after earning her GED diploma in prison, learning how to use a smart phone, getting a job, attending her daughter Tia’s upcoming wedding and hugging her 17-year-old son Draven.

“I’m dying to see my son,” she said. “It was a lot for him to deal with when I left and I think it hit him the hardest.” She thinks back on herself and her two children and the way they were together: “We were the three stooges.”

After losing so much time with her children, she wants to start a program that helps those in prison stay connected with their families.

“It’s not just the person who gets sentenced,” she said, “everyone does.”

As her faith wavered but then deepened in prison, she said, “You can’t go back, only forward.”

Even after the most ordinary of things, dinner at Cracker Barrel, Del Prete’s family gazed on her as if she were a mirage.

“Are you still here?” Tia asked her mom.

“I know, please don’t wake me up.”

Medill Justice Project fellow Manini Gupta contributed to this report.