

Illinois Prison Project and Jenner & Block Welcome Home Kensley Hawkins

Publications

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Kensley “Sonny” Hawkins, who turned 70 years old this year after spending over 39 years in prison, walked out of Shawnee Correctional Center last week a free man. Mr. Hawkins suffered from numerous serious medical issues that made him extremely vulnerable to COVID-19, and we are overjoyed that he returned home to his loving daughter and grandchildren.

Mr. Hawkins grew up in a single-parent household and was one of 10 children. To support his mother, he dropped out of high school and enlisted in the United States Army, where he simultaneously earned his GED, worked as a cook, and earned a National Defense Service Medal and a parachute badge. After leaving the Army, Mr. Hawkins attended Chicago State University with dreams of becoming an electrical engineer but once again faced the overwhelming pressure of supporting his mother and his family. Mr. Hawkins dropped out of school yet again. In the midst of his financial stress, Mr. Hawkins’ brother committed suicide in their childhood home. Distraught and desperate, Mr. Hawkins agreed to be the get-away driver of the van used in a gas station robbery. The van was later traced back to a person who had been killed before the group went to rob the gas station. As a result, Mr. Hawkins was convicted for murder based on the conduct of his co-defendant, under the controversial theory of accountability.

Always industrious, Mr. Hawkins worked throughout his incarceration. He started as an upholsterer and cabinet maker at Stateville Furniture Factory. Skilled with his hands with a knack for engineering, Mr. Hawkins made products like desks, chairs, bookcases, and cabinets and was eventually promoted to “lead worker” at the factory. More recently, Mr. Hawkins ran the “Set Up” department of the Shawnee Metal Factory. If Mr. Hawkins has a product design, he can quickly prepare the sheet metal for welding and painting. Throughout his incarceration, Mr. Hawkins has been repeatedly recognized for his service and high-quality work and hopes to transfer some of the skills he’s acquired to his new life as a free man. Throughout his incarceration, Mr. Hawkins remained close to a large network of family and friends, including his devoted daughter Ramonia.

Mr. Hawkins was zealously represented by Department Counsel Lisa Schoedel at Jenner & Block, as part of IPP’s pro bono program. Ms. Schoedel’s commitment and dedication to Mr. Hawkins and his case paid off: Last week, she received a call from the Illinois Governor’s Office, telling her that Mr. Hawkins would be coming home.

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