

[Son forgives and befriends man in prison for father's murder](#)

- SHARON COHEN, Associated Press Writer

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(01-03) 00:06 PST DAVENPORT, Iowa (AP) -- The day he drove to the prison, Ed Mutum thought of the murder scene long ago and his father's black-and-gold eyeglasses lying in a pool of blood on the tavern floor.

So many painful memories had endured: His mother's frantic cry that night: ``They're carrying bodies out of there!' His heart-pounding rage. His father's 200-car funeral procession that snaked silently through town.

But so many things had changed in nearly 28 years.

Mutum was no longer the angry young man who stayed up all night wondering how to avenge his father's murder. Or the nasty drunk who tangled with the cops.

That was the old Ed. The new Ed had been sober for three decades.

He was a respected man. He was a minister.

And Ed Mutum had made a decision during one Saturday sermon. The subject was forgiveness, something he had talked about many times before. But this night was special: The minister told his congregation he would practice what he preached.

So a few weeks later, Ed Mutum walked down a long prison corridor, head bowed in silent prayer, listening to his footsteps as the metal bars clanged behind him.

He had come to meet Sherman White, a man who had been locked up his entire adult life for the murder of the minister's father.

He had come to forgive him.

The Shamrock Tavern, a neighborhood joint with a mint-green front and dangling Schlitz sign, is long gone.

So, too, is the Mutum family house across the street. One January night in 1972, Clifford Mutum, a 63-year-old retired foundry worker, dashed out to buy a beer for himself and a Pepsi for his wife.

He never returned.

Just hours earlier, he had dined with his son, Ed, who was celebrating his one-year anniversary of sobriety. Clifford Mutum said he was proud of his boy. That was a first.

“To that point,” Ed Mutum says, “it was the greatest moment I ever had.”

That same night, a group of young men crossed the Mississippi River from Rock Island, Ill., looking for money and trouble. Three of them entered the Shamrock.

When they left, three men were dead. Three others were seriously wounded, including one brutally beaten in the face with the butt of a shotgun.

The vicious crime enraged the community. When Sherman White became the first of the accused to stand trial, the 17-year-old lookout faced one victim's son. Ed Mutum, then 21, testified for the prosecution.

For once, he was on the right side of the law.

Police knew Mutum as a thief, an alcoholic and a drug abuser. He was in and out of jail. And in and out of the hospital for overdoses that shrunk his 6-foot-10 frame to a skeletal 138 pounds.

“Ed was a real creep,” recalls his older sister, Daisy Bruce. “Mom had some gray hairs and a lot of them came from Ed. He was sort of a

hustler."

Watching the trial, Mutum was torn between his old and new ways.

"I'd wake up at night angry because I hadn't evened the score," he says. "Then a faint voice would come into my head saying, 'You're not this way anymore.'"

White was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

The shooter and a second man later received the same sentence. Two others pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and served 10 years each.

Mutum followed the case closely and once, while working in jail in a county alcohol program, he encountered two of his father's killers awaiting sentencing. They taunted him.

He saw a jailer's gun lying unguarded, and for a split second, wondered. Then he had a revelation.

"They were punk kids going to be spending the rest of their lives in prison," he says. "I knew it would be hell. I can honestly say I didn't think about them again for 28 years."

Ed Mutum moved to California, dreaming of a show business career.

He found work as a business manager for the Harlem Globetrotters. (A photo of Mutum towering over Meadowlark Lemon, one of the team's stars, adorns his office wall.)

He married and became a father, and the memory of his own father's murder rarely surfaced. But once he sobbed uncontrollably for hours after watching a TV program that showed a man being shot in the

face.

Mutum had several sales management jobs before losing all his money in a bad business deal. He returned to Davenport in 1988, starting a shelter for substance abusers.

Six years later, at a retreat, he decided to enter the ministry.

Mutum never thought about Sherman White, who entered prison at an age when many kids are packing for college.

It was the latest chapter in his troubled life.

White had lost both parents by age 13. He lived with an uncle in Detroit for a time, then returned to Rock Island, and attended an alternative high school. Sister Jean Agnes Phillips was one of his teachers.

“He had a good mind,” recalls the nun, who has visited and written White since his 1972 conviction. “He was a good person who got caught up in a hopeless situation.”

As a 17-year-old lifer, White was angry and reckless. He got into lots of fights. He spent lots of time in solitary confinement.

“I didn't really care if I lived or died,” he says in a telephone interview from the Iowa State Penitentiary in Fort Madison. “It's a constant battle not to be consumed by things that happen in prison.”

White earned his high school equivalency diploma and took some college courses. He calmed down, he says, “when I realized I wasn't wearing out the concrete and steel.”

White “went through an angry period,” says Clemens Erdhahl, his attorney for 15 years. “I think he has much more compassion and

empathy now."

But his sense of futility grew.

``At some point in time you say, 'Is this it? Man, there's got to be more than this in my life,' " White explains. ``I was at the end of my rope. I was about to give up."

Then came his break.

The 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals threw out his conviction last October. It ruled that authorities withheld evidence that police may have coached a survivor who identified White as participating in the robbery.

It was a crucial distinction: White always claimed he was a lookout, and never took anyone's wallet. The court ordered that he be freed or receive a new trial.

That decision came shortly after Mutum told his congregation at the Asbury United Methodist Church he would forgive his father's killers.

When the court ruling was announced, reporters asked Mutum if White should go free.

Yes, he said, it was time.

Then Mutum made a shocking offer.

``If he needs a place to live," he said, ``he can stay with me."

And so began a most unlikely friendship.

White wrote Mutum, thanking him for his courage. Weeks later, they met behind bars.

Mutum remembered a teen with an Afro, an attitude and a sneer. He shook hands with a 45-year-old with a shaved head, horn-rimmed glasses and a hesitant, soft-spoken voice.

In a 2 1/2-hour conversation, White talked about prison life and his regrets. He also apologized. Mutum had just one question: As the lookout, he asked, "Why didn't you run and knock on someone's door?"

"I was only thinking of my own butt at the time," White replied.

"I understood that," Mutum says. "I was selfish and self-centered."

Mutum felt an instant connection with White.

"What do we have in common?" asks the 49-year-old balding minister, clasping his mitt-sized hands. "Everything. There's a guy, who at 17, I could have traded places with in the blink of an eye."

Since then, Mutum has visited monthly. He and White talk and write weekly. Their letters are friendly, even familiar.

"You seem like someone who's been there all along, like when you sit in a dark room, you think you're all alone, but when you turn on the light, you realize someone was sitting there all the time," White wrote Mutum.

White says he is overwhelmed by Mutum's gesture.

"He is a giant of a man, more than in physical stature, but in character," he says. "He's done something for me no one has done in 28 years. He said, 'I forgive you.'"

His sister, Brenda Hickman, calls it "a blessing from God."

Mutum is convinced he did right.

“He made a mistake, a HUGE mistake,” the minister says. “It caused me more pain in my life than I want anyone to know. But when do we say when. When do we say enough?”

Mutum says his four siblings -- including Daisy Bruce -- approve.

“As kids in our family, we made some bad choices,” she says. “If Sherman White was JUST the lookout ... then I think he has paid sufficiently for a very bad choice.”

“I can't say I've gone that far in my own heart, but forgiveness is a good thing,” she adds. “We've had a lot of years with a lot of bitterness and hate.”

Late last year, Mutum lobbied Bill Davis, Scott County attorney, not to retry White.

“Ed is persuasive -- all 6-foot-10 of him,” Davis says. “He had lost his father. Now he's willing to come and put his neck on the line for one of the people who had caused the murder. I was very impressed.”

Other victims' families didn't see it the same way. They were angry and didn't want White freed.

But the prosecutor ultimately decided to enter into a plea agreement, he says, largely because of the difficulties of prosecuting a 28-year-old murder.

In January, White pleaded guilty to second-degree murder. He apologized once more. Then he and Mutum embraced.

Mutum knows some people doubt White's sincerity. He does not.

``I have worked with the worst of the worst for 30 years," he says. ``I know when I'm being conned ... and I'm not."

But the prosecutor fears White may be saying what Mutum wants to hear.

``Ed is the most honest, sincere individual," he says. ``I don't know if he's too trusting. Time will tell who's right -- him or me."

White's future is uncertain.

This month, the state revised his release date from 2005 to 2002 after reviewing White's file, according to Erdahl. But the attorney still is not satisfied and is pursuing his client's immediate release.

White is apprehensive about freedom after nearly 30 years as an inmate.

``I was afraid when I came into prison," he says. ``Now I'm afraid about getting out."

He expressed his fears in a letter to Mutum.

``I can't drive," he wrote. ``I can't swim. I've never seen an ATM machine and I'm computer illiterate. The last time I was on the streets, three people could eat off a dollar at McDonalds."

White says he's grateful Mutum has offered him a place to stay but fears his presence could harm the minister.

But Mutum is determined to help -- in any way possible.

``I want him to be able to stand on his own," he says. ``He's had people standing over him for 28 years. I want him to be free."

EDITOR'S NOTE -- Sharon Cohen is the AP's Midwest regional reporter, based in Chicago.

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