



Connie Farris

Theirs is a tragic love story for the ages. She's in prison, and he continues to deteriorate more each day from muscular dystrophy, at this point unable to care for himself. And the BOP wants to keep them apart—even though she meets the criteria for compassionate release.

UPDATE: After applying for compassionate release numerous times and being denied, Connie was finally released on September 19, 2019, because of the “Elderly release” provision of the First Step Act.

“There is not a day that goes by that I don’t think about my husband being alone, trying to fix his meals, get dressed, with no one to help him, no one to talk to,” says Connie Farris. “He is all alone. I could be there with him helping him cope with the disease as it continues to destroy his body, but here I sit.” At the age of 75, Connie’s husband Rex has a devastating degenerative disease, and Connie, 74, is in her seventh year of a 12-year prison sentence. They are both

trapped: he in his failing body, and she at the Federal Correctional Institution camp in Dublin, Calif.

It doesn't have to be this way. In October 2016, as Rex's condition continued to deteriorate, Connie applied for compassionate release. The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) considers a prisoner eligible for this kind of reduction in sentence (RIS) if they meet the criteria of "Incapacitation of a Spouse or Registered Partner," and no family member can step in to help—exactly the situation for Connie and Rex.

Sure enough, the warden approved the application, and on Jan. 17, 2017, the Justice Correctional Program Division issued this recommendation: "The Correctional Programs Division recommends approval of the RIS request. Inmate Farris meets the eligibility requirements of Program Statement 5050.49." The BOP medical director and the correctional programs director agreed with the warden and said Connie should be released to take care of Rex. But six months later, the general counsel of the BOP denied the request, citing the nature and circumstances surrounding her offense: multiple counts of mail fraud, several of which were dismissed.

The compassionate release program, established by Congress in the 1980s, directs the BOP to bring a motion for release to the judge when the prisoner meets certain criteria. The final decision on Connie's application, to deny her release even though she meets the criteria — even though the warden, the medical director, and the programs director all concur she should be released — is all too common. Only one in four requests makes it past a warden, and only six percent of those are approved. Prisoners wait five to six months, sometimes longer, to learn their fate, which is precious time when someone is suffering from a fatal disease.

Connie and Rex have been married for 54 years. "As hard as it is to believe, Connie and I didn't care for one another when we first met," says Rex. "I was working at a beauty supply company in Tulsa where we both were raised. I was trying to put enough money together to stay in college when she came to work as the assistant to the bookkeeper. We'll just say it was quite a while back. I was 20 and she 19 at the time. Anyway, we didn't speak to each other that much for a while, but when she smiles at you, it's very hard not to smile back.

“We loved each other dearly, but I believe much more important is being good friends—and Connie and I were great friends. We married about a year after we met, and Connie went to work full time while I worked part time while going to college at night. I’m the one who’s high-strung, and it was always Connie calming me down whenever I had trouble with my work or school—that’s what a good friend does. We always participated in other things with our friends, but it was always better being with each other.”

Years passed, and when he was in his sixties, Rex was diagnosed with a rare neurological disease, Emery-Dreifuss Muscular Dystrophy. This slow-moving ailment erodes the muscles and has no cure. The couple have no children or living relatives. Since Connie has been in prison, Rex has had no one to help him.

At this point, he can barely lift his arms. He has trouble preparing food and feeding himself, it’s difficult to bathe, and he spends the large majority of his days and nights alone. He was even homeless for a time. “He’s just wasting away,” says Connie. “And the worst part of it is that there’s nothing I can do about it.”

The two try to talk on the phone every day; they get five minutes in the morning and five minutes at night. “I cannot begin to explain to you how I live each day not knowing if Rex will answer my next call; not knowing if something has happened to him. It is the worst feeling knowing I could be there to help him and not being able to.”

Rex echoes Connie’s depth of feeling: “A lot has changed, but Connie and I are very good friends, and our love for each other has not, and will never change.”

They only have each other, and according to Connie, “My husband Rex is my reason for being.”