

The LIFE & DEATH of *BILLY BAGGETT*

He was released from prison after spending most of his life behind bars. As he walked into a world he no longer understood, he contended with a lifetime of trauma and came to terms with his own imminent death.



street roots

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On July 4, 2019, Billy Baggett sits in front of a food cart where he liked to order burgers at Southwest Fifth Avenue and Harvey Milk Street. | PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Introduction

On telling Billy's story

In 2019, more than 600,000 men and women were released from prisons across the United States. William “Billy” Baggett was one of them.

Like most of the others, Baggett emerged with a toxic criminal record, little to no money and few prospects of anything else. He had spent 50 of his 68 years on Earth behind bars, and he left prison for the last time in a wheelchair, HIV positive and suffering numerous debilitating health conditions. He was impoverished and unwanted, with no close family or friends. He was dying, but he was free.

So what happens to people like Billy? What happens

to the hundreds of thousands of people just like him after they are processed through our criminal justice system and returned to our communities?

That's what we wanted to know, because like Billy, approximately 95% of the people now in state and federal prisons will be released back to society.

In this special report, Managing Editor Emily Green immersed herself into the world of an ex-prisoner. Green's epilogue on Page 51 provides her personal insight into the unconventional relationship that developed out of this project.

It cannot be stated enough that this exploration is not intended to soften the horrific nature of Billy's crimes. He killed two men. And yet there is another story to tell, one that, while tethered to those crimes, speaks more about our society at large. As much as this story began on the day Billy left prison, it really started when Billy was a child, a long, long time ago.

Billy had lower cognitive functioning. He was the product of a teen pregnancy, grew up in an abusive home and was subsequently neglected as a child. His youth was burnished on alcohol and rebellion, having been failed early on by the education system. Juvenile detention facilities became his classroom. As he neared his death, he cried as he recounted being gang raped when serving his first adult prison sentence for robbery. This was all before he drunkenly killed two men months apart when he was in his early 20s. Prisons are full of stories like Billy's.

Billy's reentry into society decades later continued to be filled with numerous obstacles and dead-ends. His story shows how long-term incarceration makes it a near impossibility to

thrive once free. It's a system that intensifies a downward spiral, and it seems almost a miracle when there's an exception to that plummeting fate.

Billy died, mercifully perhaps, before the pandemic took hold. Now, nearly 10 months on, COVID-19 is surging through prisons across the country, prompting a new perspective on the service rendered by our mass carceral system. It's too early to tell the impact of early releases, but it's well past time we acknowledge the false perceptions about what our prison system solves and act on the problems that it causes.

The United States locks up more people per capita than any other nation – a population that is statistically less educated, poorer and less healthy than the public at large. An estimated 1 in 5 prisoners has a serious mental illness.

Once inside an American correctional facility, prisoners are offered little in the way of rehabilitation. Instead, they face violence, dehumanization, humiliation and in many cases additional psychological torture wrought from solitary confinement.

No matter how much time they serve, for many, the sentence never ends. As they exit the system, each faces extreme barriers to employment, social integration, housing and a stable life. Those instabilities often contribute to reincarceration, as it did in Billy's case. Recently released prisoners also face a greater likelihood of homelessness – nearly 12 times that of the general public.

All of these obstacles are steeper for women and people of color, who face even more severe “prison penalties,” as the Prison Policy Initiative describes them. Prisons have always been integral to systemic racism, and today the depth of

research on this and related issues makes the personal and societal damage incurred by our prison system undeniable.

There is so much wasted energy and lost potential in systems like this. Billy's life tells that story well. It also tells the story of the network of social services and individuals who worked to reconstruct a life in the final few months he had left.

Given the intimacy of some of the details in Billy's story, we took some special considerations in telling it.

One is our use of first person. It's unconventional for newspaper journalists to refer to themselves in an article, but there were several instances in this story where sticking to that rule felt disingenuous. The reporter shadowing Billy was a significant presence in his final months. First person was used in several instances where using "Street Roots" instead would have downplayed that fact.

Additionally, publishing details of trauma inflicted on a vulnerable person is not something Street Roots takes lightly. From the outset of this reporting project – back when this article was intended to focus solely on reentry – Billy was eager to reveal the abuse he'd endured as a ward of the state. Slowly, records revealed he was speaking the truth, and it became clear we could not report on the end of his life without acknowledging the toll his incarceration had taken on his well-being.

Billy reviewed much of the contents of this piece with the reporter before he died. This was done for accuracy but also to ensure that he was comfortable with the level of personal details included. He did not feel pressured to reveal everything; he asked certain things be off the record, and we

obliged. While some details are horrifying and others humiliating, this was his life, and he wanted the world to know.

Please take the time to walk a mile in Billy's shoes. It is not all sad, we promise. But neither is it a sentimentalized journey. It is, however, incredibly and honestly human.

— *Joanne Zuhl, Street Roots executive editor*

In this Street Roots special report, we share the story of William “Billy” Baggett Jr., who spent nearly 50 years of his life behind bars.

Our reporter shadowed Baggett for nine months, beginning in May 2019 when he was released from prison and ending with his death earlier this year.

During the course of many interviews between the reporter and Baggett, from interviews with those who knew him and from hundreds of pages of records associated with his incarceration, psychological evaluations and arrests, a brutal and tragic story of a man’s squandered life unfolded.

Upon Baggett’s most recent release from prison, he relished his final taste of freedom, but he struggled to fit into a world he no longer understood as he came to terms with his own imminent death.

This story is not intended to dismiss the serious nature of his crimes but instead seeks to bring forward one man’s life spent inside the American penal system, the trauma he endured, and his adjustment to society afterward.

Our story begins seven years ago, when Baggett was out on parole, briefly, after serving a 38-year sentence.

Please note: This story contains graphic descriptions of physical and sexual abuse.

Part I

Interlude

It was over a few grocery-store items that Billy Baggett forfeited another six years of his life.

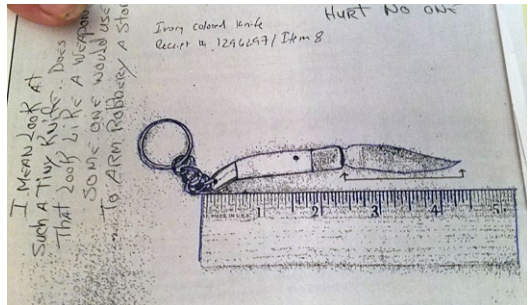
It was dinnertime in Portland on Aug. 2, 2013, when he attempted to walk out of the Fred Meyer on Burnside Street and Northwest 20th Place with his backpack stuffed full of stolen items: a bottle of B12 vitamins, a package of deli ham, a cold sandwich, pickled pigs' feet, socks and a couple of DVDs.

When store security grabbed hold of his pack, he panicked and pulled out a keychain pocket knife with a 2-inch blade. Then, he dropped his bag and ran.

Not knowing what to do, he ducked inside a nearby bar, the Marathon Taverna, and headed to the men's room, where he lit a cigarette and pondered his situation.

"That's when I found out," he recalled jokingly, "that I must have a conscience."

He probably could have gotten away with it, but he returned to the grocery store minutes later to apologize for what he had done. He was promptly arrested.



The keychain pocket knife that elevated Billy Baggett's theft in 2013 from misdemeanor shoplifting to felony armed robbery. | PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

“I was hoping when I came back to apologize, they would give me a job,” Baggett later said during a police interview.

He was out on parole after serving nearly four consecutive decades in prison, and this was his first misstep.

He hadn’t been able to find steady work since his release from prison, and now, after just 11 months of freedom, he was going back inside. He would have been charged with shoplifting, but when he pulled out the small knife, it elevated his crime from a misdemeanor to a felony.

“I was hoping when I came back to apologize, they would give me a job.”

Multnomah County prosecutors charged him with two counts of first-degree armed robbery, but in a plea deal, he took a conviction for felony attempted robbery instead. He was sentenced to five years and 10 months. The parole board slapped him with an extra 14 months on top of that for violating parole – all for \$98 worth of groceries.

Shortly before his ill-fated shopping trip, Baggett had contemplated how returning to prison might not be his worst option.

Before being paroled the year before, in 2012, he hadn’t stepped foot outside the prison system since 1974.

Back then, Baggett was cruising around Florida in his blue 1968 Plymouth Satellite with a racing engine

and gold-flaked paint he had sprayed on the vehicle himself. A flashy dresser, he often wore white patent leather zip-up ankle boots and flares – “like bell bottoms, but not as wide,” he said. He liked to cock his wide-brimmed, black-felt fedora to its side.

He remembered a gallon of gas cost about 39 cents when he pulled up to the pump, listening to Eric Clapton’s “I Shot the Sheriff” or Steely Dan on the radio.

His youth was spent largely between Thomasville, Ga., and Palatka, Fla. – small towns with fewer than 30,000 Southerners and 200 miles between them.

When Baggett decided to head west, he’d already gone through two marriages and had a string of robberies and a prison stint under his belt. Behind him, he left what he described as a blossoming career in the cocaine trade, along with the body of a fellow drug trafficker in Florida. Baggett was just 23 years old.

His recollection of life prior to incarceration was often brimming with over-the-top stories of his criminal exploits. He’d rehash detailed conversations that he’d embellished with time, and his soft blue eyes would gleam as he relived glimpses of his glory days to those who knew him in his final months.

Despite spending most his life in prisons far from home, he never lost his Southern mannerisms. His Georgian drawl was a connection to his former self – the adolescent who had not yet squandered his future.

As a much older man on parole decades later, he was known to prank social workers and medical staff, and he often employed his gentlemanly charms to flirt with nurses and people passing on the streets. He commonly broke the ice

with a magic trick or sleight of hand, always starting conversations wherever he saw an opportunity.

But under all the jokes and the tall tales of times spent on the lam ran an undercurrent of trauma and exploitation that Baggett struggled to reckon with as he approached his death.

As a young man, Baggett had been in Oregon for just three weeks before he shot and killed a man outside a Portland nightclub one night in a drunken stupor.

Two convictions in 1974 – first-degree murder for the man in Portland and manslaughter for the drug trafficker in Florida – resulted in 38 straight years of incarceration, taking Baggett into some of the nation’s most brutal federal penitentiaries. He was also transferred among Nevada, Wyoming and Florida state prisons, but he served the majority of his sentences in Oregon.

While Baggett was incarcerated for taking the lives of two men, it did not appear he was a violent man in prison. He was sent to solitary confinement dozens of times over the years as punishment for disrespecting authority and contraband infractions, but he was never cited for assault or fighting. The only person he tried to kill in prison was himself, multiple times.



In 2012, Baggett was paroled at age 62. About a quarter of prisoners in his age group who were released around the same time in Oregon committed another felony within three years of getting out, despite their advanced age. That's according to data on prisoners older than 60 who were released between 2013 and 2016 from the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Upon leaving prison, Baggett was unfamiliar with “society,” as he always called it. He no longer recognized the world around him. The culture shock Baggett experienced was far from unique.

“Some people, even if they grew up and lived in Portland before their conviction, they come out, and the MAX tracks have been laid, the whole transportation system has changed, technology, as far as phones and ATM machines,” said Brian Valetski, who works with people coming out of prison in his role at the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice.

These challenges are not limited to senior citizens. Valetski said he serves “folks in their 40s and 50s that have lower cognition, mental illness,” who come up against the same issues.

Until last year, the county offered a place where former prisoners could learn basic life skills to help them function in a technologically-driven world and get job training and education. But, due to budget cuts from the state, the county closed the Change Center.

“It's really a shame because it really cuts what is available to P.O.s to use to support folks on probation,” said Dave Riley,

Baggett's corrections counselor with Multnomah County. "They have community service, they have electronic monitoring, and they have jail now. They don't have other groups in-house that they can refer them to."

The first time Baggett tried to buy a coffee, he handed 65 cents he had in his pocket to a barista at a downtown Starbucks. He was shocked to learn the beverage cost \$4. He left without it.

Cars and SUVs driving past him looked like spaceships, he said. The first clunky iterations of the personal computer hadn't even come to market when Baggett started serving his sentence. He'd never been on the internet or sent an email in his life. It was like walking onto the set of a sci-fi movie.

Baggett had changed, too. The once reckless and often inebriated youth who committed murder in the disco era was now a 62-year-old man trying to start fresh. An entire lifetime inside the walls of prison complexes separated him from his former self.

Inside the penal system, as much as it had brutalized him, Baggett had figured out how to survive, and he knew what to expect. Outside, he felt helpless.

But he was not without help. He was housed in a subsidized apartment inside the Central City Concern's Henry Building in downtown Portland, and caseworkers assisted him in the long process of attempting to secure Social Security benefits – he never got a check before going back to prison – and they signed him up for Medicaid, which was much needed given his significant health needs.

When he was incarcerated, he picked up heroin and methamphetamine, injecting the drugs for many years; he



Billy Baggett spent his first day out of prison rolling around downtown Portland with the Hotel Alder site manager, who helped him get signed up for Social Security, food stamps and health benefits. | PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

smoked cigarettes and cannabis for decades; and he ate the notoriously subpar food that's served to prisoners most his life. He contracted HIV in a Florida prison in 2005. By the time he was released in 2012, it had been more than a decade since he last used hard drugs, but his body was starting to fall apart. His progressive lung disease, COPD, worsened when he picked up smoking again as a free man. But poor health and premature death are common among America's prisoners.

Research analysis from the Prison Policy Initiative spells out the health impacts of incarceration. It found that with millions of Americans behind bars, mass incarceration has taken five years off the overall average U.S. life expectancy. It also points to nutritionally inadequate prison food and the risks associated with solitary confinement as detrimental to prisoners' health long after their release.

Further encumbering people released from prison is the isolation that extends from their incarceration into the world outside. This was true for Baggett.

Aside from a cousin who lived in Portland, Larry Baggett, he was alone. Both his parents and his younger brother died while he was incarcerated, leaving him with one remaining sibling, a sister in Thomasville, Ga. She told Street Roots she has no memory of her brother before his imprisonment. Baggett said he asked her once during a phone call if she loved him, and she responded that she barely knew who he was. It broke his heart.

Despite their distance, she had offered to let him come live in a trailer on her property, and for a while, he tried to find a way to get back to Thomasville. But, the travel costs and limitations of his supervision stood firmly in the way of his return. He got discouraged and decided to stay in Portland where he knew his medical needs would be met. He was also against wearing an electronic monitoring device, a requirement if he moved out of state. He served his time, he told his sister. He wanted freedom.

“People with family are far more successful than those without,” Valetski said, noting that despite Baggett’s lack of close familial connections, he was lucky to be released in a metro area. “The rural counties in Oregon have far less resources than we do.”

Baggett had food stamps, but no money, and the fines he owed to the state of Florida, along with the supervision fees he had to pay Multnomah County, weighed heavily on him as they stacked up, according to his counselor’s file notes.

He found that even though he was free, many comforts he’d

missed behind bars were still equally out of reach. He craved his favorite food, fried chicken. But even a meal at KFC was above his means. He felt like an outsider, unable to dine at restaurants or pay for a ticket to the movies.

Baggett knew from the outset of his release that he wasn't in for an easy life. Despite the apartment and food assistance, he felt like he didn't have the support he needed to be successful in his transition, and he expressed these fears to the people supervising his parole.

A Multnomah County parole officer typed into Baggett's file that he was "completely OVERWHELMED AND FRIGHTENED (capitalization theirs) due to being incarcerated for 38 yrs."

It was also noted he didn't know how to cook or take the bus, and that despite his many ailments, Baggett was denied Social Security disability benefits. He was given some bus passes and a booklet that listed local resources for low-income people. As the months passed, it was entered into Baggett's file repeatedly that his health was deteriorating and he was feeling increasingly isolated.

"Everywhere I tried to look for a job, they turned me down," he said. "I was too old, my health was too bad, and I had a prison record, and they didn't want to hire me. I couldn't even get a job washing dishes."

But Baggett knew how to hustle. He began hanging around outside Club Rouge, a strip club a few blocks from where he was living. He ran errands for dancers while they were on shift. He might pick up a pack of cigarettes or other items they requested. He swept the sidewalk in front of the club. Sometimes he'd watch the club owner's car. It wasn't close to

a paycheck, just \$30 or \$40 a night, but it gave him a little cash to spend.

“I think as long as Larry was alive, Billy did pretty good,” Baggett’s sister, DeAnne Harrell, said of their cousin who lived in Portland. “But after Larry died, he kinda flipped off the deep end.”

Larry Baggett died in January 2013.

It was during the summer following his cousin’s death that Baggett decided he was willing to risk his freedom for a few groceries. He thought he no longer cared whether he was outside of prison. While the sentiment was fleeting, his impulsiveness meant he’d spend the majority of the time he had left back inside.



In 2019, Baggett was nearing the end of the sentence he earned for robbing Fred Meyer. Now confined to a wheelchair, he spent most of his time on the bottom bunk in his 8-foot by 10-foot cell, watching his 9-inch television. Sometimes he'd illustrate cards that other prisoners would send to their loved ones.

About three years earlier, Dr. Garh Gulick at Snake River Correctional Institution in Eastern Oregon diagnosed him with congestive heart failure.

Baggett also had blood clots in his thighs. He had edema – fluid retention in his legs and around his heart – and his kidneys were beginning to fail. While he had managed to keep his HIV at bay, his COPD had entered its final stage, and he often required an oxygen tank. Even the smallest task, such as getting up to use the bathroom, rendered him breathless.

Baggett said his health was so dire that Gulick recommended his early release.

“He said, ‘You’re not going to live very much longer, but I’m going to turn in a letter to the DOC health department to tell them it would be more humane to allow you to die in society rather than have to die in

“He said, ‘You’re not going to live very much longer, but I’m going to turn in a letter to the DOC health department to tell them it would be more humane to allow you to die in society rather than have to die in prison.’”

prison,” Baggett recalled.

He was able to get the 14 months he received for violating parole shaved off his sentence. If not for that, he would have died behind bars.

“Our population is aging in prison, and typically, they’re looking to release them,” said Valetski, who supervised Baggett’s parole officer. “This has been an ongoing issue for many years now.”

That year, Baggett was one of 192 prisoners age 60 or older Oregon Department of Corrections released. A department spokesperson said the agency could not say how many of those prisoners were chronically ill. The same year, 26 prisoners age 60 or older died in custody.

In New York, where older prisoners make up about 20% of the prison population, a bill introduced in the state Senate would afford prisoners age 55 and older who have served 15 years of their sentences a hearing to determine if they can be released to community supervision. The Elder Parole Bill, as it’s known, passed out of the Senate Crime Committee in April 2019.

Determined not to fail at freedom again, Baggett began preparing for his reintroduction to society months in advance. He contacted a charity in Orange, Calif., Wheels of Mercy, which agreed to send him a free motorized scooter he could use once he got out. His COPD made it nearly impossible to wheel himself around in the DOC-provided manual wheelchair. He requested multiple times to be transferred to Columbia River Correctional Facility where he might be offered some transitional assistance, but he changed his mind when he discovered a prisoner he had beef with was housed there.

Most people coming out of prison do not possess Baggett's resourcefulness, his caseworkers said. In many cases, that means they get less help. But despite all of Baggett's efforts, the system isn't designed to meet the needs of aging prisoners with medical issues when they're released.

The morning of May 31, 2019, as Baggett wheeled out of prison, familiar fears and anxieties returned. Only this time, he faced old feelings of inadequacy while also contending with his mortality.

There is no reentry facility with skilled nursing staff, so Baggett was placed on the third floor of Portland's Hotel Alder, which serves as reentry housing for older people coming out of prison.

That's where I first met Baggett in person, just hours after he arrived in Portland following his release.

He was a heavy-set senior, sparsely covered in crude, black-ink prison tattoos and wearing a striped polo shirt and khakis that were provided to him as he exited the penitentiary; he had no other clothes. Preferring to wear black, the outfit made him feel like a clown, he later said. His long, straight gray hair was tied back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck and extended down past the middle of his back. He wore cheap glasses, the prescription so old they barely helped his vision.

It quickly became apparent, as someone once wrote in his prison file, that he "presented as a polite Southern gentleman."

He was in good spirits, telling cornball jokes to county staff as he clumsily maneuvered his new scooter.

He was initially quite happy with his room. It was larger than

most, to accommodate his wheelchair, and included some shelving, a twin-size bed with one sheet tied in a knot at its end so that it functioned as a fitted mattress cover – just like they do in prison, said Baggett. There was a microwave he didn't know how to use, a fridge, a table and a chair.

His first day out, the Hotel Alder's site manager escorted Baggett around downtown as he signed up for health care coverage, an Oregon Trail food benefits card and Social Security payments. He was given a few Goodwill vouchers and bus passes.

His release was on the last day of the month, and it was a Friday. Anyone whose sentence ends on a weekend gets out the Friday before, making Fridays the busiest day of the week for reentry. This creates a headache for social workers, forcing them to scramble to get benefits lined up for their clients before the weekend.

Riley, Baggett's county-provided corrections counselor, specializes in working with those released with medical and developmental disabilities. He said it was imperative that Billy got his Social Security payments rolling the day he got out.

"You don't get paid for the first month you get out; you get paid for that next month," he said. That meant that if Billy didn't get signed up that day, he would go through the entire month of June without benefits.

After signing packet after packet at the county's Aging and Disabilities office, the Hotel Alder site manager walked with Billy to get some clothes, dishes and other basic items from Central City Concern's clothes pantry in Old Town.

Baggett took a couple of used shirts, pants – the only pair in his size – socks and towels, along with an extra pillow,



At Central City Concern's Recycling and Reuse Operations Center, Jerry Boynton shows Billy Baggett a pair of used pants. | PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

some dishes and a baseball hat. He turned down the offer of second-hand tighty-whities.

He would use his food-stamps card for underwear; now that he was over the age of 65, the Oregon Trail card worked as a debit card, too. He would get \$182 a month to spend on food and other items. He also had \$42 he'd saved from his time in prison.

His first night at Hotel Alder was quiet. Sleeping in the dark for the first time in many years was unfamiliar.

"I don't know how to explain it," Baggett said of his first evening out of prison. "Kinda scared to just come out of the building. I didn't know where to go. So I pretty much stayed outside the door there, watched the cars go by and the people go by, and stayed in my room. Just that night. The next day I

started trying to get around a few blocks, see what stores looked like, looking at different people and all, watching pretty girls go by. But it's all strange. It's like an alien world in a lot of ways. All my life, I seen the world through a window called television, and that's the only thing I know."

While a doctor at the Multnomah County Health Department gave Baggett a medical marijuana card, he was not allowed to use cannabis while living at the Hotel Alder.

"They get federal funding, and it's still illegal federally,"

Riley explained. "It is frustrating. I would love to see us have another way to do that." But, he added, cannabis use could be triggering to other residents trying to stay clean and sober.

The Hotel Alder posed other problems. Baggett's motorized wheelchair made it impossible to close the door of the shared bathroom down the hall from his room, so he had no privacy when using the toilet. He was also unable to bathe himself thoroughly. The bathroom was often unavailable when he needed it, which was frequently because of the water pills he was taking. Several times this put him in the humiliating situation of urinating on himself.

Baggett complained he had trouble sleeping because he couldn't breathe when he laid down flat.

"All my life, I seen the world through a window called television, and that's the only thing I know."

He tried to prop himself up in bed with his two pillows, but it was an inadequate solution.

It became clear over the course of Baggett's first day out of prison that he was unable to stand without gasping for air and needing oxygen. After he was left alone to get his room in order, I helped him unpack the single garbage bag that contained everything he owned – a couple of old letters, prison paperwork, hygiene items and medical supplies – and made his bed for him. It would be the only time his bed was made while he lived at Hotel Alder.

While the county could house Baggett there for up to six months, he was kicked out after four when he tested positive for THC.



Part II

Into hell

An avid yarn spinner, Billy Baggett often told animated stories about his childhood hijinks and the exploits of his father, whom he glorified. But scratch the surface, and most who knew him would soon see the reality of his upbringing was darker than his well-worn tales let on.

Baggett's mother, Doris Ann, was just 17 when she gave birth to him in the Deep Southern town of Thomasville, Ga. It was June of 1951, and she named him after his father, the 20-year-old moonshiner she was married to.

The young couple soon moved across the state line to Palatka, Fla., where Baggett remembers his father would hide money made from selling his illegal spirits

inside the walls of the family's three-bedroom, 60-foot trailer.

In those days, a gallon of moonshine went for \$9.

"It will take your breath away – it's *real strong*," Baggett said. "Daddy used to have this old pickup truck he'd go down to the woods with, and he'd cook off a batch of whiskey, and if it didn't really taste right, he'd pour it out and put more mash with it and cook it a second time and use it as gas for the truck. It would smoke, but it would run!"

His father, William Baggett Sr., dropped out of school after the ninth grade but found he had a knack for acquiring businesses. He started with a couple of dry cleaners and later added a truck stop and two taverns. Later in life, he'd sell cars.

Baggett fondly remembered piles of gifts under the family Christmas tree each December.

"They say you're born with silver spoon in your mouth? Not me," Baggett said on more than one occasion. "I was born with a solid gold spoon in *my* mouth. They tried to give me everything in the world – and I tried to play Jesse James."

Baggett said he misbehaved as a kid. He skipped school, drank his father's booze, stole petty items and sassed authority. Throughout his life, he consistently described his childhood to prison psychologists as one rife with domestic violence.

Earlier this year, from his hospital bed on the third floor of Legacy Good Samaritan Medical Center in Northwest Portland, he relayed a story about the time he watched his mother extinguish a cigarette against the skin of his father's cheek.

"I thought one day, they were gonna kill each other," he said.

Before their eventual divorce, his parents brought two more children into the world. Randy Baggett was born when Billy was 5, and their sister, DeAnne Baggett, came along when Billy was 15.

Now DeAnne Harrell, his sister remembers family Christmases differently, with no recollection of extravagant gift giving, though her oldest brother was already institutionalized by the time she was born.

“My daddy was a mean man. He was mean. And he handled a lot of things with violence,” Harrell recalled. “It was alcohol induced. My parents didn’t do drugs, but they were both alcoholics.”

Baggett Sr. was also an active member of the local Ku Klux Klan, she said.

His youngest son, Randy, suffered from a rare but debilitating immune deficiency disorder, hypogammaglobulinemia – similar to the “bubble boy” disease.

“I really honestly think that probably had something to do with Billy’s problems,” Harrell said, “just because here he was, the oldest child, and Randy was the youngest child (before Harrell was born), and Randy got all the attention from my parents.”

Baggett loved his little brother dearly, and as a child, he tried to protect him from the poking and prodding of doctors by acting as a blockade and throwing fits. This made it difficult for his parents to bring him along to the countless hospital visits. Instead, he’d often be sent to live with relatives for extended periods of time.

The family never expected Randy to live past age 7. He lived

to age 26, dying while Baggett was in prison.

“My mom and daddy spent so much time with him that I felt rejected,” Baggett said. “I couldn’t handle that rejection, so I done everything I could to get attention, even if it was wrong, even if I knew I was going to get an ass-whoopin’.”

He said his father beat him mercilessly and often, starting at age 6. “I don’t remember one day I didn’t get my ass tore up with a belt,” he said. “But I deserved every one of them.”

As an adult, Baggett advised parents to never hit their children. “Take away a toy instead,” he’d say. It was something he felt strongly about.

Baggett also said a cousin sexually abused him when he was a child. While it was a story Baggett repeated throughout the years to counselors and psychiatrists, it was an allegation his sister said she doesn’t believe.

“It didn’t happen once; it happened a bunch,” he said. “We’ll keep his name out of it. He’s still alive. I don’t want to hurt him. He grew up and grew out of that. I grew up and grew out of it.”

Records show Baggett ran away from home repeatedly in his adolescence. He began drinking at age 6, heavily at age 13. After running away, he was sent to live at a training school at age 14, then at the Youth Development Center in Georgia for stealing cars, or “joyriding,” as he called it, when he was 15. Both were juvenile correctional facilities.

“I didn’t want to go to school,” he said. “After the first grade, mine was nothing but straight F’s. I wouldn’t go. Drop me off at the front door, I was out the back door.”

He said he never played a game of baseball, basketball or football in his life. “I don’t know how,” he said. “All I wanted to

do is play Huckleberry Finn and go swimming and fishing and climbing trees and running from the law.”

He didn't fit in and felt like something was wrong with him. He was placed in special-education classes. He dropped out of school entirely after the seventh grade.

Later in life, he was assessed as having an IQ of 87 during a psychological evaluation in prison. His sister lamented he had “mental problems.”

“You gotta understand that I was borderline retarded,” Baggett said. “With that mentality and not having an education, I grew up in a make-believe world, thinking everything was right, but it wasn't.”

“I grew up in a make-believe world, thinking everything was right, but it wasn't.”

In 1968, at age 17, he married Martha Jean Norse in his parents' living room. Martha was five months pregnant when Baggett was sent to prison the next year, now as an adult, for burglary and car theft. First he went to Lee State Prison, then to the Georgia State Prison in Reidsville. He was sentenced to six years but would serve only three.

While he was locked up, Martha divorced him and remarried. He never would establish a relationship with his only child, a daughter, who did not respond to an interview request from Street Roots. She didn't respond to a request on Baggett's behalf to reconnect with him before his death either.

Until the day he died, Baggett said her mother, Martha Jean, was the love of his life, although she completely cut off contact with him decades ago.

One year at Christmas, Baggett called his sister's house from prison, and she put his daughter on the phone with him. It was the only time they'd speak. He remembers it fondly. He told her he loved her, he said. Overhearing the conversation, Harrell said her niece was cold when talking to the father who'd been in prison all her life. "She told him, 'You do the crime, you do the time,'" Harrell recalled.



It was during his first prison sentence, in Reidsville in 1969, that Baggett ran into a friend from juvenile detention named John Gardner.

“John was like an adopted brother. Every time my mom and daddy come to see me, they would come see Johnnie, too,” Baggett said.

He recalled that one night, two prison guards came into Baggett’s cell to wake him and escort him to the hospital floor. They mistakenly thought Baggett was related to Gardner, and therefore it was policy to inform him of the news: Gardner had been brutally raped and murdered.

“Five grown men took him in the back of the dormitory, wrapped a guitar string around his throat with a knife in his side, and cut his pants off and raped him and choked him to death,” Baggett said. “I was telling people, if I find out who killed my little brother, I’d kill them. But word got to those same five guys, and one night they rode down on me and they treated me the same way they treated John. They put a guitar string around my neck, and they cut my clothes off.” His eyes began to well with tears, as they often did when he recounted violent experiences. “Three of them took me,” he said.

Baggett recounted this sexual assault during numerous psychological evaluations over the years.

The Georgia Department of Corrections could not verify Gardner’s death, but the state archives indicated there was a prisoner by that name in Reidsville in 1968, who was close to Baggett’s age.

“This entire ordeal stuck with me in my head when I got



Baggett served his first sentence as an adult at the Georgia State Prison in Reidsville.

| PHOTO BY JUDSON MCCRAINIE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (CC BY-SA 3.0)

out,” Baggett said.

He drank heavily, and seeing his ex-wife remarried made it worse.

“I didn’t want to be around another man raising my daughter. It hurt me too bad,” he said. “So I run off to Florida.”

In Florida, Baggett said, he quickly got involved in the cocaine trade, helping to unload shipments arriving on boats in the backwoods of Miami from Colombia.

This line of work eventually turned sour. Back up north in Palatka, he and a man named Horace “Leroy” Griffin were running in the same dope ring but didn’t like each other.

Baggett initially said that one day in April 1974, he was sent to an empty house to keep watch, but when he got there, Griffin’s lifeless body was already lying on the floor of the

bedroom. It was a set up, he said.

According to his file, however, he described the Florida killing to prison authorities as: “I blowed a man’s head off with a shotgun because he was going in another room to get his gun.”

His file also indicated he confessed to a Multnomah County sheriff later that summer that he shot Griffin with a 12-gauge shotgun.

Baggett later admitted his recollection of events that day were foggy at best. He said he was on LSD and was drunk. According to reports, he fled the scene with the murder weapon in the dead man’s car.

Harrell said Baggett’s defense attorney, now deceased, told her family at the time that her brother was innocent and wouldn’t serve much time in a plea deal for manslaughter.

“Billy told me he didn’t (murder Griffin), then he told me that he did,” said Harrell. “I honestly don’t think he knows if he did it or not.”

She said her parents were told at one point that her brother had the mentality of a 7-year-old and that he was prone to believing anything he was told.

“That was his personality,” said Harrell. “If you told him he did something, he would believe it, and then from that time on, it was like, ‘Oh yeah, I did that.’”

Following Griffin’s death, Baggett skipped town. But first, he called his father for help. Baggett Sr. sent his son up to Oregon, where he had a couple of cousins he could lay low with for a while. Baggett said he took his time hitchhiking to Oregon, stopping in Mexico to party for a while along the way. He eventually ran out of money and arrived in Oregon that fall.

He'd be in Portland for only three weeks before murdering Jerry Gerads.

It happened outside a country-western bar, Club Venus, where the two men had gotten into an altercation earlier that night. Gerads, 31, was celebrating his upcoming birthday with his twin brother and a few friends. Staff at the bar said he was drunk, dropping money all over the place. According to witness statements, at one point, he got into an altercation with Baggett. Gerads was kicked out of the bar but returned around 2 a.m. looking for the money he'd lost. When Baggett stumbled out of the bar, he saw Gerads in the parking lot.

What happened next remains unclear. Baggett said he was blackout drunk, but he knows he murdered the man.

"We went back behind the club, and to this day I don't remember how or why. It's never really has made any sense, but I shot him six times. I still don't know what happened," he said.

Baggett said police had several versions of events they tried to get him to confess to. The one that stuck was that Gerads was sleeping in his car and Baggett lured him out and then shot him.

"If there is ever anything beyond anything I ever done in my life, I'm sorry for that right there more than anything there is," Baggett said. "There is no way I can bring him back. He could be walking beside me right now, being my best friend. But I got to one day, I got to go before God, and God will tell me what happened. I can't forgive myself – I hope my family can forgive me – but for me to forgive myself, is impossible."

After shooting Gerads, he attempted to hide the body in a secluded area near the Portland airport under some dirt and

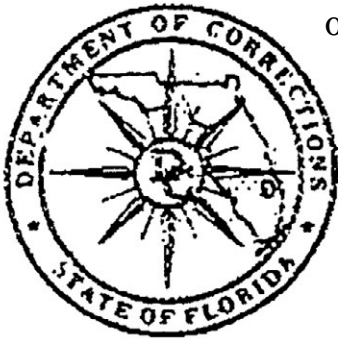
weeds, and then he fled, driving straight to Buffalo, N.Y. It didn't take authorities long to name Baggett as a person of interest, or to apprehend him in Gerads' car. Multnomah County sheriff's deputies transported him from New York back to Oregon, and it was on the plane they began to question him about the unsolved killing of Leroy Griffin in Palatka, Fla.

Why, in his old age, Baggett so readily admitted to killing one man but not the other is a mystery.



Baggett was handed a life sentence in Oregon for Gerads' killing and an additional 15 years in Florida for Griffin's death. He had been incarcerated for four years at Oregon State Penitentiary when, in 1978, Corrections Sgt. Henry Hal Johnson, the president of the corrections employee union, began to sexually assault him.

According to a report Street Roots obtained from Oregon State Police, Baggett complained to the deputy superintendent at the prison that he had been coerced into performing "the act of fellatio" on Johnson over the course of three months, and he wanted it to stop.



Police set up a listening device inside Johnson's office so they could catch him. It worked.

"When we entered the room, Sgt. Johnson immediately started fumbling with the front of his pants, keeping his back towards us for several seconds," stated the lieutenant's report.



"He approached me, and he tried to force me into participating in homosexual activities. He was a voyeur – he liked to watch," Baggett recalled. "When I wouldn't do what he wanted me to do, he started beating the hell out of me, and had another officer



Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem. | PHOTO BY JOSEPH GLODE

beat the hell out of me and lock me up (in solitary) for no reason.”

When prisoners are sent to solitary confinement, they are afforded a disciplinary hearing, but Baggett said Johnson’s tactic was to pull him out of solitary before any such review could take place.

“He would get me out so there ain’t no paperwork, and this went on for some time. And I ended up doing what he wanted me to do. So after a while, he wanted to participate. He wanted to not only watch; he wanted to be involved. He forced me to” – Baggett took a long pause, his voice cracking as he continued – “do oral sex on him, and he forced me to do anal sex on me.”

According to the Oregon State Police report, Johnson was not using physical force, however another prisoner told state police officers that when he refused Johnson, his freedoms were taken away.

According to Johnson’s resignation letter, his departure was

voluntary and “of my own free will and under no duress.”

No charges were ever pressed against him. He remained in Silverton and went on to work in the grocery industry before retiring in 2002. He died, leaving behind three children, in 2008.

A news brief that ran in the Statesman Journal following the police investigation into Johnson’s assaults was vague and inaccurate. It identified Johnson by last name and initials only. The paper reported that his resignation followed an isolated incident of sexual activity with one inmate.

Based on the police reports, however, the abuse lasted for months and involved several inmates.

Since the time of Baggett’s assault, Oregon has made it a crime for a corrections officer to engage in sexual activity with a prisoner. The crime, known as “custodial sexual misconduct” is a Class C felony and is punishable with up to five years in prison and a \$125,000 fine. Oregon was one of the last states to recognize that prisoners are incapable of truly giving consent.

Baggett wanted the truth about what happened to him to come out. With the majority of his life spent in prison, these events in 1978 were among some of his life’s most pivotal, especially considering the consequences.

Just two weeks after Johnson resigned, Baggett was transferred to the federal penitentiary system – an unusual move for a prisoner in state custody. He contended he was being punished for outing Johnson. The only note about the reason for this move in his file reads: “Mr. Baggett was transferred into federal custody in March 1978 as a result of his having difficulties within the Oregon State Prison System.”



LIFE was tattooed on Baggett's left hand, LOVE on his right. | PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN



Baggett would spend the next five years of his life in some of the most notorious prisons in America. First stop was the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kan., known for housing some of the nation's most violent offenders. Word quickly got around that Baggett had been providing a sergeant in Oregon with sexual favors.

"The second day I was there," Baggett said, "three guys walked in my cell carrying butcher knives. And they said, 'You've got one of two choices: You can become a sissy boy — put on makeup and shaving your legs and turning tricks — or you can die.'"

"Well, I'm still alive, so what does that tell you I had to do? For almost six years I had to do that."

Baggett wasn't a large man, standing about 5 feet 10 inches. He was young; he had thick, long hair on his head but sparse

hair on his body; and he was attractive, as noted in a letter from the Multnomah County judge who sentenced him to life in prison.

“Mr. Baggett is a young man of not unattractive appearance,” he wrote. “He has some homosexual tendencies.”

Baggett was transferred among federal penitentiaries – from Leavenworth, to Atlanta, to Memphis, to Cherry Hill, Ind., to Oklahoma and then finally to Lompoc, Calif.

“Everyplace I went, the reputation followed me, and I had to do what I had to do to survive. So, I got involved in that kind of lifestyle,” Baggett said.

Sometimes, he said, it would begin consensually, but often, “it turned into a nightmare.”

“If you see a 20-, 21-year-old boy, no hair, something’s definitely going to happen. That’s how they make them girls. Some guys go in with a two-year sentence, end up with life because they fight back,” he said.

The Aryan Brotherhood approached him on three occasions to offer him protection, he said. He refused each time, knowing that protection came for a price.

The Prison Rape Elimination Act, or PREA, was signed into law in 2003. It took another nine years before corrections facilities were required to give prisoners ways to report sexual assault. Prison rape, however, is far from eliminated. In 2015, more than 1,400 allegations of rape were determined valid, according to [data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics](#).

Just last month, a transgender woman’s lawsuit against the Georgia Department of Corrections for failing to protect her from repeated sexual assaults was widely reported. Ashley Diamond was housed at the same prison in Reidsville, Ga.,

where Baggett was first gang-raped as a young man serving his first adult prison sentence in 1969.

Oregon's Snake River Correctional Institution and Two Rivers Correctional Institution, where Baggett would also spend many years of his sentence later in life, were more violent than Oregon State Penitentiary, he said, but none were as brutal as the nation's federal prisons.

He said he'd never forget the screaming.

"Seeing four or five inmates go into a youngster's cell to rape him," he said, "you wanna help, but if you do, they'll do the same to you. You close your eyes, close your mind. But how do you shut it out? I hear things. I can hear ghosts."



Prison “wasn’t all bad,” Baggett said. He described good days, too — days that revolved around escapism through intoxication.

He also had a few memorable long-term relationships with other prisoners, men he loved.

First there was “Jackie,” the bank robber from South Carolina. Jackie was dealing heroin inside federal prison. That’s when Baggett began injecting drugs.

Baggett’s father saw track marks on his arms during a visit once in 1979 and asked the warden to lock him up to get him off heroin. After Baggett detoxed, Jackie would only give him meth, which he mainlined. He would use hard drugs for years within the prison system, though he was rarely disciplined for drug use.

Despite his protests, Baggett was transferred back to Oregon State Penitentiary in 1982. The assistant superintendent there had penned a letter to the Federal Bureau of Prisons stating that Oregon was having budgetary issues and could no longer afford to board Baggett in federal prison.

Once back in Oregon, he began a relationship with another prisoner, but that relationship dissolved when both men were transferred from the penitentiary after acting as informants.

But Baggett’s true gender identity and sexuality eluded him throughout his life. “I don’t want to be gay,” he said as he neared his death. “I’m just totally, totally confused.”



In the telling of his story, Baggett was adamant two events be brought to light. The first was the sexual assault at the hands of Sgt. Johnson. The second was another incident at Oregon State Penitentiary in 1985 that Street Roots was unable to fully substantiate.

Something transpired that put Baggett at odds with other inmates around that time and led to his transfer, once again, out of state. This time he was sent to a state prison in Wyoming.

Baggett claimed he uncovered a plot among other prisoners to start a riot that would serve as cover for killing the assistant superintendent, J. C. Keeney. He said he helped prison staff locate two .38 revolvers that had been smuggled into the prison inside of paint canisters for that purpose.



Oregon Department of Corrections has no record of this incident, nor does Oregon State Police. But state police did have a report for a 1984 in-prison drug possession conviction against the same inmate Baggett said had masterminded the assassination plan. It was a conviction that added time to the man's sentence.

There were also several notes about an assassination plot in Baggett's file. In 1998, an interoffice memo a corrections captain penned

stated: “Mr. Doran, Baggett’s Counselor, has confirmed with me that in 1985 an incident did occur where Baggett provided information regarding an assassination conspiracy and drug trafficking.”

The same counselor entered into Baggett’s file that he’d spoken to Baggett’s parents, William Baggett Sr. and Doris Ann Rayburn, about their son. They confirmed his allegations. “There definitely seems to be something went on but no documentation of what or how,” he wrote.

An undated memo from Keeney’s boss, Superintendent Hoyt Cupp, in what appears to be 1984 or early 1985, indicated Baggett was in the prison’s segregated housing unit to protect him from prisoners he owed gambling debts to, and it attributed that information to Baggett’s psychologist. But even then, according to the same document, Cupp noted that Baggett insisted he was in protective custody because he had “informed the authorities at the institution of a gun in another inmate’s possession.”

Street Roots was unable to locate the former corrections counselor, Larry Doran, but did track down Keeney, now retired and living in Arizona.

Keeney said he put in a good word for Baggett with the parole board for his help with the investigation into Sgt. Johnson’s sexual abuse in 1978, but the assassination attempt, he said, never happened. And no guns were ever found at the prison on his watch, he said.

He remembers Baggett as a Southerner, small in stature, who was always stirring up trouble. “He was kind of a pest,” said Keeney. “He knew his way around the system pretty well.”

Baggett's assassination story, in which many lives are saved, as he tells it, may have served him in some ways as atonement for his earlier crimes. Whether true or not, Baggett seemed to believe it, even requesting that Street Roots secretly record him attempting to get Keeney to discuss the incident with him over the phone.

According to Baggett's prison records, he was transferred to Wyoming Department of Corrections in 1985 "for his protection as an informant."

Baggett remained in Wyoming state prison for nearly 14 years, where he appeared to settle into a more productive incarceration. He obtained his GED and completed a mechanical drafting class. He enjoyed watching movies in his cell, listening to music on his stereo, playing chess and making leather crafts for his family, according to Wyoming correctional records.

In 1998, he was transferred back to Oregon. This time he was housed at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution. That's when the suicide attempts began.

He was paranoid, constantly fearing he would be killed for being a rat. He was on and off suicide watch every few months.

Photos of a bed sheet hanging from a vent 10 feet off the ground in his cell show how he had tried to hang himself in April 1999. He told prison staff he couldn't handle his life any longer.

One year and eight days later, he would attempt suicide again while in solitary confinement at Snake River. He was in solitary confinement frequently and sometimes for long periods of time in those days, often for using foul language

and disrespecting prison guards. A few times he went for failed drug tests, property damage, sex acts and for disobeying orders. In 1999, he spent a period of three months in solitary confinement and was issued a \$200 fine after repeated unwanted sexual advances toward a cellmate.

The repeated isolation over the years took its toll. At times he thought he was losing his mind.

The first Christmas after his father died in 2003, Baggett was once again in solitary confinement, alone with his memories of childhood holidays made merry by his father's over-the-top toy shopping.

Despite a tumultuous relationship with his parents in his youth, they remained the only constant source of support throughout Baggett's life.

They traveled from Georgia to visit him regularly in prisons across the country. Three years before he died, Baggett Sr. paid Oregon Department of Corrections more than \$5,000 to have his son transferred to Florida, where he would visit him more frequently in his old age.

Two years after his father's death, Baggett was diagnosed with HIV.

“At first I wanted to kill myself; I couldn't handle it.

“At first I wanted to kill myself; I couldn't handle it. But after two or three months went by, I started thinking, it ain't death I want; I want to live.”

My name is William P. Baggett Jr.,
and my number is 36893, I am a
inmate of OSP.

I am in a P.C. cell down at
the city jail, I have been down here
for about 3 months now, and trying
to get a transfer to the state of
Florida.

I am doing a life sentence for
the state of Oregon, but I have

But after two or three months went by, I started thinking, I ain't death I want; I want to live," he said.

He found Jesus and began attending church services, though he said the lifestyle of prostitution that had defined much of his time behind bars still haunted him. Other prisoners dismissed his diagnosis and pressured him into sexual acts, he said. An indication they likely had the virus, too, he said.

He was baptized in March 2006. His mother died two months later. Six years later, he finished his sentence in Florida but was required to report for parole in Portland — a city he had only vague memories of from the three weeks he spent there leading up to the murder he committed in 1974.



Billy Baggett sits in his studio apartment inside the Bud Clark Commons in Portland's Old Town neighborhood. The complex serves as low-barrier housing for some of the city's most vulnerable and difficult-to-house residents. This photo was taken before Baggett filled the room with new furniture. | PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Part III

The curtain falls

Billy Baggett knew that smoking cannabis would likely get him kicked out of the Hotel Alder, but he said he could breathe easier when he was high. The second time he failed a urine test, in September 2019, he was told he had to leave.

Once a person loses their reentry housing in Multnomah County, the next step is typically to place them on a wait list for a homeless shelter, said Dave Riley, Baggett's reentry counselor. There are

other housing wait lists to be put on as well, but it's rare to find something right away. Given Baggett's condition, it's unlikely he would have survived homelessness very long.

But his HIV diagnosis saved him from that fate. A nonprofit that worked with him since his release, Cascade AIDS Project, moved him into the Bridgeway Inn & Suites near the Portland International Airport. His room was paid for with a federal grant from the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program while the nonprofit's staff searched for a more permanent place for him to live.

In a landscape where only the sickest of the sick get supportive housing, new resources become available when you contract HIV. But even then, it can be highly competitive. Baggett's caseworker with the county's health department, Kristin Meyer, was hoping to see him get a room at Our House, an assisted living facility for people with HIV. Even though he was suffering from multiple chronic illnesses and essentially dying, there was someone worse off who got the first open bed that became available.

Before his death, Baggett asked Cascade AIDS Project employees to speak about his case for this story. Supervisors at the nonprofit asked that we not publish staff names given the continuing stigma associated with HIV.

Cascade AIDS Project works with many HIV-positive people coming out of incarceration but is unable to connect with roughly half of those who request its services prior to their release. This is due to a poor working relationship with the Oregon Department of Corrections, said one Cascade AIDS Project case manager.

The nonprofit was able to move Baggett into Bud Clark

Commons before his hotel voucher ran out, which another case manager at the nonprofit said “is pretty unheard of” due to the complex’s long wait list and high vulnerability requirements.

But county employees working with Baggett thought he would be more successful somewhere else.

Bud Clark Commons is located in Old Town. A seven-story building with 130 studio apartments, it opened in 2011 to house the city’s most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness. In line with the Housing First model, residents are permitted to drink and use drugs behind their closed doors. The building has at times [put a strain on police](#), with high rates of disturbances involving drugs and weapons.

“There’s a lot of sketchy behavior that goes on over there,” Riley said. “And I want to make sure that he’s OK, given that he’s a pretty vulnerable guy with a lot of medical issues. And, even though it sounds like marijuana is just his main drug of choice, I don’t want to see him get into some other things there.”

Baggett wanted to live downtown, near his doctor’s office at the Multnomah County Health Department headquarters and close to the county parole office – places he rode his motorized wheelchair to on a regular basis. He also liked the abundance of foot traffic – plenty of people who might be open to an impromptu conversation with a stranger, or who might smile at his disappearing cigarette trick.

While Bud Clark Commons is in the heart of the city, Baggett disliked living there. He said he didn’t like the people he’d run into in the elevator, and he was surrounded with drug use that he often found triggering. And he was lonely.

He complained he'd often sit in his room alone all day with nothing to do and no visitors. He worried he would die in the apartment and no one would know for weeks.

He never relapsed, but near his death, it was getting increasingly difficult to stay away from heroin. He also struggled to quit smoking every time he left the hospital, where doctors fought to keep his lungs functioning. He could buy a single cigarette off just about anyone, and the smell always lingered in the air outside the building.

While his modern studio had a nice view and was in good condition, it was small and constructed for an able-bodied person, not someone in a wheelchair. He didn't have any in-home medical support until early November, after he'd been living there a couple of months. That's when the county began sending a nurse, Trevis Hutsell, to visit him in his studio apartment several times a week to help him with tasks like organizing his medication and managing his oxygen tanks.

“He had at least one fall in his apartment that he let me know about because he couldn't get in and out of the bathtub that was made for a fully abled person,” Hutsell said. “It was very hard to make adaptations to. Even though he had an occupational therapist who came in and helped him set up systems, it wasn't enough.”

Baggett was hospitalized regularly, beginning shortly after his release from prison – sometimes riding by ambulance to Legacy Good Samaritan hospital multiple times in a single day.

Once, he took an ambulance to the hospital but walked out when staff told him to discard his marijuana. Instead, he took

it home, then called 911 and rode another ambulance back to the hospital.

Other times nurses would simply warn him to put his cannabis vaporizer pen away. “You can’t smoke that in here, Billy,” a nurse told him once when he pulled it out mischievously during an interview.



Baggett's last Christmas was rough. He spent it at Good Samaritan arguing with nurses who he said lost his clothes and medicine. "I threatened to crawl outta here on my hands and knees, butt naked," he said. "But they talked me into staying another day."

He was also upset because when he was rushed out of his apartment to an ambulance, EMTs left his apartment door unlocked. It was seven hours before the staff at Bud Clark Commons secured it, and he feared his possessions had been stolen.

When I saw him at the hospital just before the start of 2020, his hair had been chopped short in an uneven and patchy fashion. He said nursing staff gave him the sloppy haircut because when he arrived at the hospital, his long hair was a tangled mess.

"I hadn't showered for weeks," he said. He was incapable of washing himself and had no one to help him with that task. He said he was embarrassed about the way he smelled.

But Baggett was averse to the idea of assisted living, afraid it would eat up his Social Security checks and that he wouldn't be able to do as he pleased. After a lifetime behind bars, freedom was of the utmost importance.

"A lot of people on his medical team really believed that Billy needed to live in a facility to thrive," said Hutsell. "But it was really clear that he didn't want to be living by other people's rules. He wanted that opportunity to make choices for himself."

Baggett wanted rich experiences in the time he had left, many that proved too difficult – or impossible. He wanted to

visit the Pacific Ocean. He wanted to find love again – man or woman, he said; it didn't matter which. He wanted to fly to Georgia and see his sister and her kids. None of his relatives made the trip to Portland to see him after he was released from prison. He called his sister regularly. Sometimes, she'd answer.

“He's got this take on life where he just wants to live it to the fullest,” his county case manager, Meyers, said before he passed. “He likes to laugh and tell jokes, and his magic tricks. He's really friendly; he will pretty much just stop and talk to anybody – in the hallway or along the way. I think he just wants to be connected to people.”

Baggett managed to check a few things off his bucket list before he died. He watched a live drag show. A couple months after his release, he bought himself a large pair of red satin panties and a wig. He found intimacy with another person, albeit it a short-lived affair with a hard drug user who would ask him for money. And, he had enough money to feel some actual autonomy in the last months of his life. He got a back-payment from Social Security, of more than \$11,000 that was owed to him from years ago when he was out on parole in Portland the first time. He bought new furniture for his studio apartment in Bud Clark Commons. A formerly incarcerated peer mentor with Cascade AIDS Project, who CAP asked we not identify, went with Baggett to Michael's Fine Furniture on Northeast 181st Avenue.

“He was like a king in his kingdom,” the peer mentor said. “He was like, ‘I'll take it, I'll take it, I'll take it!’ And it was just cool to watch because I know he's probably never been able to do that.” Baggett spent \$6,000 that day.

His furnishings were a point of pride. So were his fully stocked refrigerator and cupboards, which he often showed off.

But through it all, Baggett suffered relentlessly from air hunger – a feeling of suffocating despite inhaling lungs full of air – common with late stage COPD.

As death neared, he contended with many demons. He feared for the eternal damnation of his soul. He mourned a life lost to confinement. And he feared his final months of freedom would be taken from him.

“The biggest struggle for him was the daily emotional fear of going back to jail,” his nurse, Hutsell, said. “Many times we sat, while he cried – afraid of acting out or of getting upset with somebody and doing something that he would regret and ending up back in jail – he lived in fear of his P.O. officer. ... For Billy, she held so much power over him that he lived in fear of making a mistake.”

He reflected on the experiences he'd had over the years, telling anyone who would listen his story – he spoke about the traumas he had endured. He was often sad that his life was ending without ever really having been lived.

“There was so much about being out in society that he just loved,” Hutsell said. “He was just excited to see people walking down the street, to ride the streetcar, take the bus someplace. ... He really did also struggle to create intimacy and friendships. He was really looking for people who would be a real friend to him, and when people would use him or were not upfront about what they were doing, it really upset him.

“He actually let at least one guy stay with him in the



Billy Baggett at Legacy Good Samaritan Medical Center, where he was often taken due to breathing difficulty from late-stage COPD. | PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

apartment for a week or so, just because he was like, ‘You don’t have a place to go, let me help you out, you don’t have any food, let me feed you.’”

On Feb. 28, Baggett died alone on the third floor of the Good Samaritan hospital. He’d been admitted four times that month.

What wasn’t understood at the time is that had he lived any longer, he would have been imprisoned again, only this time by a pandemic. Alternately, if he hadn’t been granted early release, he would have been vulnerable to catching COVID-19 in prison. As of Dec. 4, 1,407 Oregon state prisoners had tested positive.

Hutsell was the last person outside of hospital staff to see Baggett alive. He visited him on Feb. 26, and the two spoke about whether he should go into hospice, as his medical

providers at the hospital were suggesting.

Baggett didn't want to do that, and he told Hutsell he didn't see the point. He told me the same thing over the phone the same day. He wasn't ready to go, he said.

Hutsell told him people often go into hospice so they can be at home, surrounded with friends and family as they die. "But I have no friends or family," Hutsell recalled Baggett saying. "My friends are the people working at CAP, my friends are the people at the clinic, my friends are the managers at Bud Clark, my friends are Emily over at Street Roots, these are my friends." Hutsell told Baggett he cared about him and that he knew others did as well.

"I had to reflect to him that (what he said) was beautiful, and also really hard," said Hutsell. "Because I know that we are all professionals that are, in one way or another, paid to be there with him."

As Baggett lay in his deathbed, Jennifer Creswell, the chaplain at Good Samaritan, said she "assured him of God's forgiveness" as he shared his fears of going to hell for the crimes he'd committed.

She said before he died that day, she sang songs with him – mostly about freedom.

Reporter's Notebook

On shadowing Billy

BY EMILY GREEN

The last time I spoke with William “Billy” Baggett was two days before he died. When I answered his call, he began in the usual way: “Emily, they’re after me! I’m halfway to Mexico in a stolen van. I had to do it. I robbed the 7-Eleven – oh they are after me. Please don’t be mad at me ...”

In reality, Billy was lying in a bed on the fourth floor of Legacy’s Good Samaritan hospital, barely able to breathe or move. Social workers there had just talked to him about going into hospice care, but he said he wasn’t ready to do all that. He told me that once he got back home to his one-room apartment at the Bud Clark Commons, I needed to come visit and pick up the 6-foot teddy bear he had purchased for my infant son. This was his latest joke. After insisting repeatedly that he could not give me or my family presents or leave us all his belongings when he passed, this was his way of teasing me. But he would never make it back to the apartment.

We spoke for about a half-hour, mostly about what



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I was going to include and not include in the article I was writing, and then I told him I had to go. As I ended the call, he said, “Love ya!”

“All right, Billy. You take care,” I replied.

I could hear him begin to say something else, but I hung up. He never wanted to get off the phone, and there was always one more thing to discuss, so I became accustomed to having to just end our calls abruptly. His case manager at a local nonprofit told me it was because of Billy she discovered her voicemail had a five-minute limit. I found mine was three.

Billy had been at death’s door for months – there would be more calls, I thought. I pressed the red phone icon on my screen to terminate the call. I wish I’d known it would be the last call. Maybe I would have told him I loved him, too. Maybe a part of me did.

Billy was a twice-convicted killer who spent 50 of his 68 years inside juvenile and adult correctional facilities – he spent more time incarcerated than I have spent alive.

As the reporter who shadowed him closely from his release to his death, I was eventually confronted with a choice. I would have to choose between my own journalistic integrity and being there for a fellow human being when he needed it most.

I never met the 1974 version of Billy – the 23-year-old who drunkenly shot and killed two men within months of each other. The Billy I met was an old man with a friendly smile and generous heart, a man who had less than a year to live.

He was HIV positive, struggled to breathe through his COPD, was in the late stage of congestive heart failure and used a wheelchair. As he approached death, he mourned his

life lost to confinement and struggled daily to process his trauma.

Despite this, Billy was determined to spend the time he had left living as richly as he could, but more than anything, he longed for real human connection. He wanted to find love, he wanted to reconnect with family, and he wanted desperately to have friends, people who loved him.

I learned of Billy before his release, when he wrote a lengthy letter to Street Roots from Two Rivers Correctional Institution, asking for a copy of our Rose City Resource guide and explaining his circumstances. I wrote him back, asking him if I could shadow him and document the challenges he faced as he acclimated to society.

Over the next nine months, I sat down for many long interviews with him. I got to know him well. This was unlike any other journalistic endeavor I'd ever undertaken. Immediately, my importance in Billy's life became relevant. I was allowed to visit him at his reentry house because, I was told, a connection with someone outside of prison is important for a person's success in society. This notion made me uncomfortable – I was there to report, not to connect.

But Billy had no one else. He had no family who would visit him; he had no friends – aside from social workers and medical professionals, many of whom grew fond of him; he was completely and utterly alone. This made my presence in his life significant to him. I was choosing to write about him. And by writing about him, listening to him recount his experiences, I think it validated for him, in some small way, his existence.

Five months into shadowing Billy, I went on maternity leave.

I knew he didn't have much time left, so while I set all other work-related tasks aside, I continued to talk to him on a regular basis. I visited him at the hospital a few times after he'd call me in the middle of the night professing that he was surely dying. One time it turned out that he was recovering but lonely. Another time, a couple days after Christmas, doctors told me when I arrived that they had rushed him to the ICU in the middle of the night and put him on a ventilator.

On Dec. 31, I received a call from a social worker at the hospital. He told me he was calling me because Billy wanted the hospital to list me as his emergency contact in the case that he could no longer make decisions regarding his care. Would I do it?

"He said you are the only person he trusts," the social worker said.

I told him I'd have to consult with my editor.

Street Roots Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl told me she and the organization's former director had both been listed as emergency contacts for vendors. Given the nature of the population we work with, sometimes we're all a person has. She gave me the green light if I wanted to do it.

The problem was that if I did it, I would become part of the story I was covering, going against a foundational tenet of journalism. But the reality is that I was already a part of Billy's story, whether I wanted to be or not. He considered me his friend. He called me nearly every day, and his caseworkers, nurses and others all told me when I reached out to them for interviews that they had heard all about me.

I'm writing this now as a disclosure for transparency – because I agreed to be Billy's emergency contact.

I also agreed to help him with arrangements for the cremation and disposal of his remains upon his death.

There are journalists who would rightfully question this decision – myself included if roles were reversed. But when I reach the end of my own life, there will be decisions I look back on with deep regret, just as Billy did in the end, and I didn't want this to be one of them.

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