




Redemption Earned




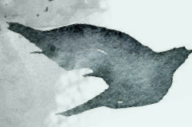
By Ellie Taube '23

Seeking Justice
for the Incarcerated
in Alabama



“BUT LET *JUSTICE*
ROLL DOWN AS
WATERS, AND
RIGHTEOUSNESS AS
A MIGHTY STREAM.”

Amos 5:24



Former Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court and University of Alabama

alumna Sue Bell Cobb wants Alabamians to care about the state's prison system, one of the most dangerous and overcrowded in the nation.

The criminal justice system in the United States aims to ensure exactly that: justice. To protect Alabamians, courts determine sentences with the intention of adequately punishing the offender equivalent to the degree of their crime and, if appropriate, encouraging rehabilitation of that offender. When judges hand down sentences with the possibility of parole, they provide the convicted individual with a second chance to follow the rules, maintain good behavior and prove that they will not reoffend if given the chance to reenter society.

Parole offers the incarcerated a goal to move toward, wherein they become productive members of their community once again. This system tells inmates that, if they meet the expectations of reform, they can then contribute their worth outside of prison walls. The burden of proving one's rehabilitation is significantly more difficult in Alabama because individuals cannot represent themselves at their own parole hearings. Redemption Earned is filling that gap.

Redemption Earned is a grassroots, nonprofit organization that represents worthy individuals seeking parole. Founded by Cobb who serves as executive director, Redemption Earned aims to resolve injustice within the Alabama prison system. UA trustee John England also serves on the board of directors.

“I *BELIEVE* THAT JUDGES USE THEIR *POWER* NOT JUST TO *FILL* PRISONS BUT TO *FIX* PEOPLE,” **SAID COBB,** ADDING, “YOU CAN *HELP* SOMEBODY PUT THEIR *LIVES BACK* TOGETHER IN SUCH A WAY THAT THEY DON’T REOFFEND. THAT’S *PUBLIC SAFETY.* THAT SAVES TAX DOLLARS. BECAUSE YOU’RE DOING THE HARD WORK OF TRYING TO *HELP* PEOPLE GET THEMSELVES MENTALLY HEALTHY, OFF DRUGS AND WORKING, SO THAT THEY CAN BECOME TAX-PAYING, LAW-ABIDING CITIZENS.”

Alabama has one of the highest percentages of incarcerated people in the nation and an aging prison population. Out of 4,002 parole hearings in 2022, only 409 were granted parole, and in the new year those numbers trend downward. Not a single individual up for parole was allowed to represent themselves at their own hearing.

Redemption Earned argues the current state of the parole system does not reflect the goal of rehabilitation.

The organization’s mission focuses on “representing worthy individuals who have earned parole or work release.”

The majority of Redemption Earned clients meet the understood conditions for parole yet are denied without explanation. These conditions include possessing a record of good behavior while incarcerated in combination

with a low chance of recidivism, a rate that decreases significantly after age 50.

Presently, Redemption Earned focuses on representing incarcerated individuals eligible for parole who are at least 65 years of age with a minimum of 25 years time served. The organization plans to lower the age range as its capacity increases.

Redemption Earned provides several services, including client screening to ensure that potential parolees pose no predictable risk to the public pending their release, and pro bono legal representation and reentry planning, such as finding nursing home placements for the elderly following the granting of their parole.

“We are filling an enormous gap. We are doing state work, because everything that we are doing, other states are doing. Other states have a

comprehensive process for compassionate release of aged and infirmed individuals. Without that, Alabama has turned our prisons into nursing homes. You judge society for what we do for the least, the last and the lost, which is the perfect description of the elderly in Alabama prisons,” said Cobb.

Many of Redemption Earned’s clients also receive documentation from the prison and from medical professionals verifying that they possess a low chance of recidivism due to health limitations and a strong, demonstrated desire to make valuable contributions in society.

Leola Harris, 71 years old and a Redemption Earned client, has served 19 years in Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women. Harris received certification from the Alabama Department of Corrections attesting that she meets the statutory criteria

Milestones: Justice Sue Bell Cobb

Graduated with BA in history (Phi Alpha Theta Scholarship Key—highest average in History Dept grads)

May 1978

Appointed by Gov. Fob James as Conecuh County district judge, age 25, youngest in the state

Nov. 1981

Won 2nd six-year term as Conecuh County district judge

Sept. 1988

May 1981

Graduated with JD, UA Law School, Farrah Law Society, Bench & Bar Honor Society, Moot Court

Sept. 1982

Won full six-year term as Conecuh County district judge

Jan. 1995

Sworn in as first woman elected to the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals



for medical parole due to the life-threatening nature of her diagnoses. Harris, who is slowly dying from renal failure, is a wheelchair user, and her dialysis is beginning to fail. The parole board denied her in six minutes and set her next hearing for five years in the future.

While parole may seem a distant concept to those in the general public, to the incarcerated, watching the parole board deny or delay the parole of their fellow prisoners with strong records and no opponents to their release greatly lessens the motivation to reform.

Larry Jordan, a former client of Redemption Earned, can speak firsthand to the demoralizing nature of witnessing more than 90% of applicants denied parole.

“The (Alabama) parole board is not functioning as it was created to do,” said Jordan.

“(The Alabama parole board) doesn’t see anybody—it’s devastating. That’s why there’s so much violence and drugs. People are saying, ‘I’m not going to make parole anyway; I might as well do this.’”



Founded the Alabama Children First Foundation

Sept. 1995

Sworn in for second term to Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals

Jan. 2001

Engineered the passage of Juvenile Justice Reform Act, reducing the children in DYS by 70%

April 2008



May 1996

First appellate judge to have a baby while serving on the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals

Jan. 2006

Sworn in as first Alabama female chief justice

March 2021

Founded Redemption Earned, a nonprofit organization dedicated to individuals seeking parole


“THE (ALABAMA) PAROLE BOARD IS *NOT* FUNCTIONING AS IT WAS *CREATED TO* DO,” SAID JORDAN. “(THE ALABAMA PAROLE BOARD) *DOESN’T SEE ANYBODY*—IT’S *DEVASTATING*. THAT’S WHY THERE’S SO MUCH *VIOLENCE* AND DRUGS. PEOPLE ARE SAYING, ‘I’M NOT GOING TO MAKE PAROLE ANYWAY; I MIGHT AS WELL DO THIS.’”

Oftentimes, prisoners are seen as distant, vague outlines of an unknown species. Redemption Earned asks that Alabamians look upon the aged, infirm and sickly individuals who are seeking parole with empathy and compassion.

“There’s so many older people in prison that are simply no longer a danger to the public,” said Cobb. “Not only is the system unfair, but it is also a terrible waste of tax dollars. We need reform.”

As Judge Thomas Woodall, a former Alabama Supreme Court justice, stated on the Redemption Earned website: “Every time parole is denied of a deserving individual, our state is saying: ‘Despite your best efforts over decades at making amends, you will never be better than your worst moment.’”



On March 7, 2023, Barbara Eckes advocated for the release of Doug Layton Jr., who killed her son with his vehicle. Layton served two decades in prison and expressed genuine remorse for his actions years before, even asking to hug Eckes, whose reciprocation of that embrace embodies the spirit of forgiveness sought by Cobb and Redemption Earned. Despite denial of parole by the Alabama Board of Pardons and Parolees, in Judge Kechia S. Davis' courtroom, Layton was granted redemption. As a result of Eckes' forgiveness, he can now take care of his aging mother and contribute positively to society. This is the outcome Redemption Earned seeks to achieve with every deserving client. 



The Honorable

Sue Bell Cobb

Born in Evergreen, Alabama, Cobb has served the state of Alabama throughout her life. Cobb graduated from The University of Alabama twice, first with a bachelor's in history and then with a Juris Doctor. In 1981, the same year Cobb graduated from UA School of Law, Cobb became one of the state's youngest judges when she accepted an appointment as district judge of Conecuh County. Cobb served in that position for two election cycles before becoming the first woman elected to the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals for two terms.

In 2006, Cobb became the first woman elected as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. In this position, Cobb supported many reforms, including sentencing, juvenile and drug reform. Cobb has received a number of accolades, including an award in recognition of producing the largest increase of model drug courts in the nation from the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, induction into the Alabama Academy of Honor and the Judicial Award of Merit from the Alabama State Bar.

After retiring, Cobb taught at Jones Law School, UA's Honors College and The National Judicial College. Currently, Cobb works pro-bono as the executive director of Redemption Earned. Cobb is married to William J. Cobb, with whom she shares three children and four grandchildren.