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Joyce Ann Brown, center, is greeted by family members after her conviction on an aggravated robbery charge was overturned

## 'Like a dream'

*After 9 years in prison, a Dallas woman walks free*

BY ASHLEY CHESHIRE  
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DALLAS—Joyce Ann Brown, surrounded by a crush of relatives and reporters, exited the Dallas County Jail and the Texas prison system yesterday for the first time since being handed a life sentence for the aggravated robbery of a Dallas fur store more than nine years ago.

"It's like a dream come true," she said. "For nine years, five months and 24 days it's like I've been in the Twilight Zone. Now I've stepped out back into the land of the living, with my family."

The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals over-

turned Brown's conviction Wednesday based on allegations that the Dallas County district attorney's office withheld evidence in the original trial.

About 20 relatives, including her mother, Ruby Lee Kelley, 65, daughter, Koquice Spencer, 20, and granddaughter, Brittany, 3, squeezed around Brown as she emerged smiling from the secured interior of the Lew Sterrett Justice Center.

"You're home," they told her. "We've got you now."

Brown, 42, dressed in red slacks and a white sweatshirt with a unicorn on the front, returned hug for hug and kiss for kiss. A charcoal suit and black purse friends had brought for her to wear from the jail were pushed aside in the crush. Then the clutch of people moved slowly down the broad hallway and into an empty courtroom where Brown took the stand.

"Now I can believe it's happening, I'm really here," she said. "My greatest regret is that I couldn't be here when I lost my stepson to suicide. I lost all the youth of my daughter, all the

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# Brown

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dreams down the drain."

Once the chances of her release seemed to improve, Brown said, she still asked, "are you kidding yourself?" and it seemed this future could be taken from her as easily as that future had been taken in 1980. She described a moment, earlier in the day, when the deputies assigned to bring her from the Mountain View prison facility near Gatesville were late picking her up.

"Even when they were late, I wondered had something happened to change their mind," she said.

Kelley, a diminutive woman with graying hair, said Brown's family was gathering at the clubhouse of her East Dallas apartment complex for a "little light party" of barbecue prepared by Brown's uncle.

Spencer, who said she had visited her mother "anytime somebody would go" during the past nine years, remembered being an 11-year-old the year her mother was taken to prison and remembered being asked by schoolmates, "Koquice, where's your mother?"

"I didn't understand what was going on," Spencer said. "I was very mad. I could have scratched somebody's eyes out."

Spencer said she asked Brown only once whether she had robbed the fur shop. She said Brown answered: "Mama didn't do this. I'll be here to take care of you shortly."

"'Shortly' turned out to be nine years," Spencer said. "But I just believed in her."

Brown, a receptionist at a fur company, was convicted of participating in the 1980 robbery of another store, Fine Furs by Rubin, in which proprietor Rubin Danziger was fatally shot.

At Brown's trial, police said the getaway car in the robbery had been rented in the name of a Joyce Ann Brown, albeit of Denver, and Danziger's widow identified Brown and another woman, Rene Taylor, as the robbers. Police also identified a fingerprint on a coathanger as belonging to Brown. Another witness, Martha Jean Bruce, testified that Brown confessed to her while the two were together in the county jail.

was Bruce's involvement in the

trial that led to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals to overturn the guilty verdict Wednesday, five weeks after a joint request was filed by Dallas prosecutors and Brown's attorneys, Kerry FitzGerald and Jack Strickland. Bruce had lied to a police officer in another matter less than six months earlier, but that information — which was a matter of public record and could have influenced the jury — was never made available to Brown's attorneys.

Dallas County District Attorney John Vance has said he intends to retry Brown.

Brown, her granddaughter in her arms, told reporters: "I'm ready for a new trial. I'm ready for whatever they choose."

FitzGerald and Strickland said earlier that they also are ready for a new trial and that many witnesses were volunteering to testify again. But "surely we would consider" accepting if Vance offered to drop the case as he did with Randall Dale Adams, whose conviction in the slaying of a police officer was overturned earlier this year.

Standing on burgundy plastic chairs at the rear were James McCloskey and Richard Reyna, the two investigators whose efforts led directly to Brown's release.

McCloskey, 47, is president of Centurian Ministries Inc., a non-profit organization that investigates the cases of people who may have been wrongfully convicted.

It was he who decided Brown's case was worthy of thorough investigation, and it was Reyna who found evidence of Bruce's recent history of giving false information. They share a very dim view of "jailhouse confessions" in which a prisoner comes forward to support a prosecutor's already weak case and later receives an early release from jail.

Both smiled and watched intently as Brown answered questions.

During the last 18 months, McCloskey said, he and Reyna had met with Brown more than half a dozen times as part of their investigation.

"We are with you until the case is finished," they had assured her.

But always they spoke through the plexiglass panels of a prison visiting room.

"Now we see her face-to-face," said McCloskey, "with nothing in between."