

100 get pardons, commutations

GOP governor's final acts

By John Stamper
JSTAMPER@HERALD-LEADER.COM

Hours before vacating his office, Gov. Ernie Fletcher pardoned or commuted the sentences of 101 people, including several convicted of murder.

Among those given relief by the outgoing governor are a man on Death Row, a county judge-executive who hasn't been convicted of a crime and the son of a state lawmaker.

The highest-profile case Fletcher changed was the death sentence of Jeffrey Devan Leonard of Louisville. Leonard was convicted of stabbing a store clerk in 1983. Fletcher reduced his sentence to life without parole.

In his commutation, Fletcher said Leonard was not provided adequate representation by his attorney, Fred Radolovich, who has admitted he didn't even know Leonard's name during the trial.

"We're not going to execute somebody who clearly was denied a basic right," said David Fleenor, the governor's general counsel. "We're not saying he's a good person."

Fletcher said he spent "hours and hours over the last few days" weighing the merits of the requests of individuals whose cases filled 10 bankers boxes.

"None of those decisions that we have to make are easy but I feel like I can lay my head down and say we've done our very best to carry out the duties of the governor till our last day," he said.

In all, he announced 84 pardons and three commutations of prison sentences yesterday. On Sunday, he announced his intention to pardon nine women who sustained years of domestic abuse before killing, or trying to kill, the abusive man in their life. He also commuted the sentences of five others who committed crimes after enduring domestic abuse.

Fayette County Commonwealth's Attorney Ray Larson said prosecutors around the state are upset with Fletcher's actions, which undermine the state's legal system.

"I think it's a disgrace; It's shameful," Larson said. "Why do you go through the process" of a trial?

Larson said he is particularly upset that Fletcher's legal team did not bother to contact the prosecutors, victims or survivors in many of the cases.

Fletcher said he's had a team of attorneys assisting Fleenor, including two public defenders, a former prosecutor and Fletcher's last two general counsels, John Roach -- a lawyer whom Fletcher appointed to the state Supreme Court for 18 months -- and Jim Deckard, now executive director of the Kentucky Bar Association.

In all, Fletcher received about 1,000 requests for pardons. "We've had a number of eyes look over each file," Fletcher said. "I've looked over every one of them personally."

Nine lawmakers wrote letters supporting the pardon application of Burgess Harrison Yonts, the son of state Rep. Brent Yonts, D-Greenville, who was convicted of wanton murder earlier this year in a hit-and-run car accident that killed a Murray State University graduate student.

"We are writing you begging for mercy," Brent and Jan Yonts wrote in a six-page letter.

Fletcher reduced Harrison Yonts' prison sentence from 20 to eight years. Fleenor said a review of similar cases found sentences of fewer than 10 years.

Fletcher also reduced the sentence of a Hopkinsville man, Devon Brown, who was convicted of wanton murder after running a red light and killing a woman and her 15-year-old daughter in 2001.

Brown, who was not intoxicated or speeding excessively, was sentenced to 20 years. "That seemed entirely excessive," Fleenor said.

Fletcher commuted Brown's sentence to time already served.

One person pardoned by Fletcher hasn't even been convicted of a crime.



Ernie Fletcher

- [Fletchers to take Caribbean cruise](#)
- [Fletcher rewards supporters](#)
- [Those pardoned](#)
- [Backgrounds of the women Fletcher pardoned](#)