Deskovic recalls stinging parole rejection

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Jeffrey Deskovic was innocent, but he figured parole was his only shot at getting out of prison.

So he told the state Parole Board last year that he was eager to join a sex-offender treatment program because it would be one more positive thing on his prison record that could win him release after 15 years.

There was just one problem: the program was off limits to those who denied their crimes. Deskovic had experience with false confessions - that's largely what landed him in prison in the first place. He considered it but could not bring himself to do it again.

"I don't think it would have been healthy for me mentally, and I would have been somewhat sickened to do that," Deskovic told the three parole commissioners on Aug. 3, 2005, according to a transcript obtained by The Journal News.

Deskovic was rejected for parole that day, but he ultimately did not have to rely on the Parole Board. He was freed last month when a Westchester judge was prodded to vacate his murder and rape convictions in the 1989 slaying of Peekskill High School classmate Angela Correa.

A DNA test linked evidence from the slaying to Steven Cunningham, in prison for killing another Peekskill woman in 1993, who has since confessed to killing Correa.

The Parole Board hearing came after Deskovic had served the minimum term of his life sentence, 15 years.

He had obtained an associate's degree and completed 30 credits toward's a bachelor's degree in psychology. His disciplinary record was a relatively good one, with one serious "ticket" for assaulting a fellow inmate in 1997.

Deskovic recalled that incident last week, explaining that he felt threatened by a group of inmates who began spreading the word he was in for a sex-related killing.

After one of the bolder inmates sarcastically warned another not to sit with Deskovic at a meal, he got a 10-pound disc from a weightlifting set and clocked him.

He thought others would come to his aid if the victim retaliated but they didn't, and Deskovic ended up beaten with the same weight before he was sent to isolation and eventually transferred to another prison.

"I was not a violent person, but I had to do something to protect myself before I was attacked," he said. "In hindsight, it still bothers me I had to do that."

The commissioners called the Correa slaying "brutal," and said they were not interested in his claims of innocence or that the prosecution's DNA test had proven he had not raped the girl. They matter-of-factly wanted to know what he might do if he got out.

Deskovic explained he was eager to get out so he could put flowers on his grandmother's grave, get a Ph.D., and eventually make enough money to donate to philanthropic causes like educational scholarship funds.

The commissioners who heard him said they considered the letters of support they received from an imam -□Deskovic converted to Islam while in prison -□Deskovic's mother and an aunt, as well as all his classes and training. But it wasn't enough. They denied his parole bid, telling him he could try again in two years.

"To hold otherwise would deprecate the seriousness of the senseless crime as to undermine respect for the law" the decision read.

Deskovic has said that the commissioners' denial made for one of the most bitter moments of his incarceration, when the criminal justice system had a chance to right a wrong but didn't seem to give him the chance.

"It was a foregone conclusion. They knew they weren't going to release me," he said. "It cost me an extra year of my life."