

Why Donald Trump gave a presidential pardon to a Breonna Taylor nonviolence activist

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Truth be told, Christopher 2X didn't want to pursue a presidential pardon.

When the prominent Louisville anti-violence activist looked back on the federal drug convictions more than three decades in his past — and how far he's come since — he'd long ago made peace with it all.

"I share my testimony about my hardships, and how I've evolved," he said Thursday afternoon. "That's so satisfactory to me. I was good with that."

But Wednesday evening, 2X got the call telling him what he'd only considered a "far-fetched" possibility was now a reality: President Donald Trump had given him a full pardon, calling him a "powerful example of the possibility of redemption."

While many of the people Trump has pardoned on his way out of office have been controversial — the father of his son-in-law, four former Blackwater contractors who killed 17 Iraqi civilians and a slew of political allies and friends — 2X is not.

The 60-year-old has across-the-aisle appeal, with Republicans and Democrats alike praising his work and his selection for a pardon.

"As someone who made a choice to change his life for the better and then dedicated that life to lifting up his community, there is truly no one more deserving of this honor," said U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, whose team was the driving force behind seeking clemency for 2X.

2X moves comfortably among people, whether it's a sit-down meeting with elected officials, at a memorial alongside the family of a homicide victim or in front of cameras at a news conference.

Though he has been an active voice for justice issues in Louisville for roughly two decades, the March 13 death of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman shot by police in her apartment on a warrant execution gone wrong, has shined a spotlight on 2X and his work.

He has acted as a go-between for attorneys for Taylor's family and the Kentucky Attorney General's Office, met with the FBI for updates on the federal investigation into her death and worked to help three anonymous grand jurors talk about their experiences hearing the case.

Kevin Glogower, a Louisville attorney who represented the anonymous grand jurors, said the only shocking thing about 2X's pardon is that it took this long.

"This is something he earned a long time ago," Glogower said.

'That's when the light came on'

Born March 18, 1960, in Jeffersonville, Indiana, as Christopher Bryant, 2X grew up in the Louisville area and has described his childhood as troubled in a 2005 profile by The Courier Journal.

At 14, he began dealing drugs and spent several months in a juvenile detention facility. By the 11th grade, he dropped out of high school.

2X was convicted of federal cocaine trafficking charges in 1984 in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he was living at the time and served more than three years in prison.

In 1990, he violated his parole and was charged with cocaine possession, which led to another three-plus-year stint in federal prison, followed by state charges for theft in the late '90s.

In 1998, he was jailed again for theft in Hardin County, Kentucky.

When 2X became a free man again in 1999, he decided this was the time he would make it stick. He joined the Nation of Islam and took his new name, according to a Courier Journal profile published in 2005.

"Through the pain of watching my family members feel the pain with me, that's when the light came on in my head," he said.

Soon after, 2X began working to connect with community groups, but a pivotal moment in his activism didn't come until January 2004.

Louisville Metro Police Detective McKenzie Mattingly fatally shot 19-year-old Michael Newby as he was running away from an undercover drug deal and setting off "a very turbulent time" in Louisville, 2X said.

Mattingly was charged with murder for Newby's death, but a jury ultimately acquitted him in October 2004.

2X became close with the young Black man's family and began acting as their spokesperson. That's when the community really began to know the name Christopher 2X.

"He made us feel like that our child counted and for us not to give up," Newby's stepfather, Jerry Bougness, said in 2005. "He gave us strength to go on."

'None of that happens without him'

2X said he's never set out to be a community leader and has never called himself one.

Instead, he's sought to be a partner, a helper and a voice of calm and reason.

It's an approach that has garnered trust from shooting victims' families and law enforcement officials alike, a skill sorely needed in 2020 as Louisville homicides have surpassed record highs with more than 160 slayings.

Since March — well before "Breonna Taylor" became a name chanted across the nation — 2X was there to support her family.

"For Breonna's case, it wasn't about him," said Lonita Baker, an attorney for Taylor's family. "And I think that's something to be said about him as a person. ... He never tried to make it a point to put himself at the forefront of it, but he was very much a part of the support system for their family."

2X hasn't led protests in Taylor's honor or been the loudest voice saying her name, but he's been doing the work in his own way.

Within the first week after Taylor was killed by Louisville police detectives, 2X was reaching out to his connections at the FBI to make sure they were aware of the case.

Glogower, the attorney for three anonymous grand jurors who wanted to be heard, credits 2X as the bridge that helped make their speaking out possible.

After the first anonymous grand juror heard Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron misrepresent what grand jurors were told and decided about the officers' conduct in the Taylor shooting, 2X helped the juror connect with Glogower, who quickly filed a motion seeking to secure the juror's right to speak about the secret proceedings.

"None of that happens without him," Glogower said. "None of that happens in the positive way that it happened without him. ... We don't get anywhere that we got without Chris."

'Never back away from a cry for justice'

Over 15 years of knowing 2X, Glogower said he has a remarkable ability to get people in the same room who would ordinarily never think to speak with each other.

"He just has a unique ability to connect with individuals from all backgrounds and find that common ground," Glogower said.

2X said he approaches people of prominence and in power the same way he approaches people living in struggling neighborhoods.

"I believe in creating reasonable relationships, but I never back away from a cry for justice," he said.

2X says he won't be tied to any a political party, instead focusing on building relationships with reasonable people.

"My No. 1 allegiance is to the poor, their families connected to their conditions and their struggles," he said. "Anybody who thinks anyway otherwise is totally misinformed."

In a year marked by political polarization and uncompromising demands to "arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor," 2X acknowledges his moderate approach — "to be a calming presence in the middle of many storms" — isn't for everyone.

He's OK with that.

"I know that people don't understand and that's fine, but when they get to sit down and have a civil conversation with me, I usually win them over," he said.

'Chris, you're worthy'

It's an attitude that led to 2X receiving congratulatory calls from both Sen. Paul, a diehard Republican, and Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer, a longtime Democrat, Thursday night.

In a statement, Fischer praised 2X for "making our city a safe, more peaceful place for everyone, especially our young people."

Paul and his team championed not just 2X's presidential pardon, but also his December 2019 pardon from former Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin for state convictions in the 1990s.

Bevin called him "a man with a heart for community service."

"He has turned his life around after a rocky start many years ago, and he has paid his debt to society," Bevin wrote in December 2019. "In fact, he has paid that debt with dividends that continue to multiply and bless those with whom he interacts."

Paul and 2X have known each other for years, and the senator recalls meeting 2X and learning about his youth group for West End teens in his 2015 book "Taking a Stand."

"This is where I saw the hope and promise that the West End owns," Paul wrote.

Since then, the two have appeared on panel discussions about gun violence, and Paul entered a report authored by 2X's nonprofit, Christopher 2X Game Changers, into the congressional record.

It was Rob Givens, state director for Paul's team, who finally persuaded 2X he should try for the state and federal pardons.

2X tried to tell him no, feeling somewhat like other worthy people should get that chance.

"Chris, you're worthy," 2X said Givens told him. "Let me try to push this and see what happens."

Givens said he felt adamantly that seeking a pardon for 2X was "just the right thing to do."

"He deserves it," Givens said. "Anybody out there that has seen what he's done, he truly deserves a second chance, to have his past erased."

U.S. Rep. John Yarmuth of Louisville, Kentucky's only Democratic member of Congress, expressed support for 2X's pardon, but not the president who issued it.

"It's a shame that Christopher 2X's pardon is grouped with so many corrupt individuals, because unlike them, he is truly deserving of a pardon," Yarmuth said in a statement. "His community service on a daily basis is a constant reminder of his fundamental goodness and value to society."

'Birthed into this world for a purpose'

Despite his initial reluctance, 2X said he is glad to have received the pardon because he has seen what it means for his family.

He watched a "glow" wash over their faces when he got the call from Paul's team with the news.

The pardon has been a Christmas gift for his family, he said.

A father of four and grandfather of 12, 2X said he told his daughter he wants to use the attention the pardon brings as a way to further share his story.

The story of going from a high school dropout to being granted an honorary doctorate; from convicted felon to a trusted partner of the FBI; from drug dealer to community leader.

"We'll use it as a tool for testimonies of redemption to the young, how they don't need to get any of these accolades to be game changers," he said.

"They can start to change from within themselves and outwardly to others, if they only understand they were birthed into this world for a purpose, regardless of conditions that try to beat them down."

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