

CRIMINAL DEFENSE

Extra Help

People make mistakes and can change, says a Tennessee lawyer with a knack for winning pardons

BY ANNA STOLLEY PERSKY

In 2024, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee issued 43 pardons. Seven of the individuals pardoned by the governor were represented by one man: Benjamin Raybin, a criminal defense lawyer in Nashville.

Raybin says he handles about 10 clemency cases each year, including requests for pardons, commutations and exonerations.

“There is a lot of need for clemency work, but it’s not something every lawyer knows how to do,” says Raybin, 40.

In Tennessee, the governor has the sole power to grant clemency after a conviction. But first, the Tennessee Board of Parole reviews clemency applications and then can recommend a formal hearing to get more information and eventually make a recommendation to the governor.

Raybin’s clemency clients have served time for a variety of crimes, including drug possession or sales, theft and murder. Many Tennesseans don’t have legal representation on their clemency petitions, according to Raybin. He adds that the pardons do not list counsel, so it’s impossible to know if someone won more Tennessee pardons than him in 2024. “But given how few pardons are granted in Tennessee and how few attorneys do this work, I can’t imagine anyone would have,” Raybin says.

When helping clients with clemency applications, Raybin tells their stories



to the parole board, explaining why his clients made “some bad turns in their lives” and what they have done more recently to “justify getting their rights back or out of prison early, to show that they are deserving of another chance.”

Raybin says he learned how to successfully argue for clemency from his father, who is also a lawyer and works with Raybin at their boutique Nashville-based firm, Raybin & Weissman.

In addition to clemency cases, Raybin spends most of his time de-

Benjamin Raybin handles about 10 Tennessee clemency petitions a year, and he won seven pardons in 2024.

fending clients against misdemeanor and felony charges. He also often takes on some plaintiffs civil cases involving civil rights, such as claims of excessive police force.

Raybin was attracted to criminal defense because the work involves “real people with real problems.”

Over the years, he has also handled some cases that have drawn him into the media spotlight.

In recent years, Raybin represented Holly Lamar, a Nashville-area Grammy-nominated songwriter and master falconer, whose business includes bringing people to her property to learn about hawks and falcons. The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency seized her birds in a 2022 raid that Raybin later convinced a judge was an “egregious” abuse of the law.

Raybin also represented Alex Friedmann, a criminal justice advocate who was sentenced to 40 years in prison in 2022 for hiding guns and other weapons in the walls of a Tennessee jail while it was under construction. Friedmann had served time previously; he was released in 1999, and he then spent about two decades advocating for prison reform. He was caught on video impersonating a construction contractor to get access to the building, and said he acted out of an irrational fear he would be jailed again and raped.

Nashville ties

Born and raised in Nashville, Raybin says he was “exposed to law basically since birth.” He loved listening to his father talk about his cases but wasn’t always sure that he wanted to go into law too.

“I kept an open mind, but as I continued through college, nothing else jumped out at me that seemed any better as a career,” Raybin says. “It turned out to be the perfect career for me.”

After graduating from the University of Chicago, Raybin went to Vanderbilt University Law School, graduating in 2010. His wife, Sarah, is also a lawyer.

Outside of work, Raybin helps care for his daughter and attends rock concerts. He also coaches the mock trial team at the University School of Nashville, the same high school he attended. He recommends that other lawyers consider devoting their spare time to helping students learn about the law.

“The kids are so excited and passionate,” Raybin says. “It’s fun to be around them. It also helps me out by keeping me fresh with all the obscure rules of evidence.” ■