

Dr. Charles Friedgood, Paroled Wife Killer, Is Dead at 99

Terminally ill with cancer, he was released from prison in 2007 after serving 31 years, then lived another decade. His death, in 2018, went unnoticed.



By **Sam Roberts**

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Dr. Charles E. Friedgood, a wealthy Long Island surgeon imprisoned for murdering his ailing wife in 1975, has died in Florida more than a decade after he was declared terminally ill with cancer and released from prison. He was 99.

His death, on May 19, 2018, in West Palm Beach, was confirmed this week by his daughter Esther Zaretsky. It had not been previously reported by his family.

While he admitted that he had injected his wife, Sophie Friedgood, 48, with a painkiller, Dr. Friedgood insisted that he had not intended to kill her. She had suffered a stroke in 1959, when she was 33, and had become an invalid.

Dr. Friedgood was convicted of second-degree murder after prosecutors proved to a jury that he had deliberately given his wife an overdose at the family's 18-room home in Great Neck, N.Y., where they had reared their six children.

Her cause of death was recorded as a stroke, but the police grew suspicious because Dr. Friedgood had signed the death certificate himself and rushed the body out of state for immediate burial in accordance with Jewish religious custom.

Five weeks later, he was arrested at Kennedy International Airport with more than \$450,000 of his wife's cash, negotiable bonds and jewelry. Prosecutors said he had intended to fly to Europe to join his paramour, a Danish nurse who had sometimes cared for Mrs. Friedgood and with whom he had fathered two children. He had begun his affair with the nurse in the late 1960s.

When released from prison in December 2007, Dr. Friedgood was 89 and the oldest inmate in New York State's correctional system, having served 31 years of his 25-years-to-life sentence. His requests for parole had been rejected multiple times before, including in October 2007, when a Parole Board panel concluded that he was likely to break the law again.

But counsel for both the State Division of Parole and the Board of Parole disagreed with that conclusion, and the matter was turned over to another parole panel. A month later it voted 2-to-1 in the doctor's favor.

The panel weighed what it called a "horrendous" crime that could not be "excused, explained or forgotten" against Dr. Friedgood's advanced age, his medical condition and his positive prison record, which included saving the lives of a guard who was having a heart attack and an inmate who was choking.

Concurring in the decision, Commissioner Thomas P. Grant wrote, referring to Dr. Friedgood: "During your interview, you repeatedly cited your status as a senior citizen. It is important to recognize that your actions deprived your wife of the ability to enjoy such status."

Chris Ortloff, the dissenting commissioner, argued at the time that Dr. Friedgood's release "so deprecates the seriousness of his offenses, the murder of his wife and subsequent grand larceny of hundreds of thousands of dollars from her estate, as to undermine respect for the law."

Mr. Ortloff said that Dr. Friedgood had used his state medical license to assume responsibility for his wife's care and to obtain the five injections of Demerol that killed her.

While Dr. Friedgood survived for 11 years despite a diagnosis of terminal cancer, he "presented little if any threat to the community" because of his medical condition, Mr. Grant said in a phone interview this week.

Allowed to live with a sister in Florida, where a daughter also lives, Dr. Friedgood was residing in the West Palm Beach area at his death.

Charles Edward Friedgood was born on Oct. 3, 1918, in Toledo, Ohio. His father, Henry, an immigrant from what was then Palestine, was a men's wear salesman. His mother, Evelyn (Rubenstine) Friedgood, was born in Germany.

He studied at the University of Michigan Medical School, served as an Army medic in Arkansas during World War II, graduated from Wayne State School of Medicine in Detroit in 1946 and then began what was described as a checkered medical career.

According to Ms. Zaretsky, in the 1950s he helped pioneer the use of the tranquilizer that became known as thiorazine and refrigerated blankets to lower body temperature during surgery, as well as the use of thiorazine to control hiccups, and that he also discovered a chemical agent for clearing bladder infections.

He was wed briefly to Geraldine Davidson, a wealthy woman from Detroit, and then married Sophie Davidowitz, who was also from a well-to-do family. She suffered a stroke in 1959, when she was 33, and became an invalid. Dr. Friedgood began his affair with the Danish nurse in the late 1960s.

Among his survivors are eight children, as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Ms. Zaretsky said his last words to his children were, "You should accomplish something that gives you satisfaction so you will keep living and thank the good Lord who keeps you alive."

Testimony from his children helped convict him, but Ms. Zaretsky, his daughter, served as his lawyer before the Parole Board.

"Did he do it?" she asked rhetorically in an interview. "That I don't know. But he served his sentence. Under New York law, he's entitled to be paroled."

Dr. Friedgood's brother-in-law, Sidney Klemow, demurred. "I knew he was guilty the minute it happened," he told The New York Times in 2007.

Complete information on survivors was not immediately available.

Dr. Friedgood came closest to expressing remorse for his wife's death in his final appearance before the Parole Board, on Nov. 6, 2007.

"I can't even at this time believe that I would do such a stupid thing, and it's lust for another woman, greed for money," he said, according to the minutes. "I can assure you I'd never repeat such a crime."

He added, "What you are seeing today is an 89-year-old man that is altogether different than he was 35 years ago."

He continued: "What good is it doing the government to have me here in the prison? I feel that I am rehabilitated with remorse and the realization of what I did was wrong."

Earlier, in an extensive interview with The Times at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility, in Sullivan County, N.Y., he was pressed on what he was expressing remorse for.

“That I didn’t take better care of her and that I should have watched and been more diligent with the injections,” he replied.

Was he glad she was dead?

“Not glad, but I felt, you know, sometimes I used to say when a person was in terminal malignancy and suffering: Sometimes it’s better you die and you not suffer so much.”

He was asked how he reconciled that sentiment with what he had told the Parole Board earlier, that he had done it and was sorry.

“Well, you try, you have to try,” he replied. “You want to get out of here. You don’t want to die in prison. So you try to appeal to their mercy and forgiveness.”

What difference would it make, he was asked, if he died in prison?

“Well, I want to be buried where my parents are buried,” Dr. Friedgood replied. “We have a family plot in Detroit. In prison they put you in potter’s field.”

He was buried in South Florida National Cemetery in Lake Worth, Fla.