

## Chrystul Kizer, accused of killing her alleged sex trafficker, freed on bail after two years

By **Jessica Contrera**

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Chrystul Kizer, a 19-year-old who could face life in prison on charges of murdering her alleged sex trafficker, was freed from a Wisconsin jail on Monday after two years awaiting trial.

Her \$400,000 bond was paid by the Chicago Community Bond Fund, an advocacy group that has been flooded with donations in recent weeks as it worked to free protesters jailed during demonstrations that erupted after the police killing of George Floyd. Kizer walked out of the Kenosha County Detention Facility carrying two trash bags full of letters she has received from supporters.

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Kizer's case has received national attention from celebrities and the activists behind the #MeToo movement. They see her as a black survivor of sex trafficking who was defending herself when she shot and killed Randall P. Volar, a 34-year-old white man, in June 2018.

Kizer, who spoke extensively with The Washington Post about her case last year, met Volar when she was 16. He allegedly abused her sexually for more than a year while giving her cash and gifts. Court records said that Volar was abusing multiple underage black girls and that police and prosecutors had video evidence of the abuse. But Volar remained free while he was investigated. Kizer maintains that Volar was trying to pin her to the floor when she shot him twice in the head. She set his house on fire and fled in his car, police said.

Prosecutors charged Kizer with arson and first-degree intentional homicide, an offense that carries a mandatory life sentence in Wisconsin. They argue that evidence shows Kizer's crime was premeditated, and part of a plan to steal Volar's BMW.

"Chrystul was being victimized and abused by someone who was not effectively stopped by the current systems," said Sharlyn Grace, executive director of the Chicago Community Bond Fund. "That lack of protection from the systems we claim to keep us safe required that she act in self-defense to survive."

Kizer's bond was originally set at \$1 million, but was lowered to \$400,000 this year. A defense committee led by her mother had been working to raise the funds but hadn't come close to the needed amount. As the nation turned its attention to criminal justice reform in the wake of Floyd's killing, new supporters learned of Kizer's story and donated to her cause.

Meanwhile, the Chicago Community Bond Fund was working to release protesters who had been arrested during demonstrations in Illinois. So many people donated to support its work that the fund was quickly overflowing with more than it needed

to bail out protesters. Although Kizer is not in Illinois, Grace and others thought her case was where the money should go.

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At 2:02 p.m., Kizer was released in downtown Kenosha. Her public defenders had previously said she would live with her mother in Milwaukee if released.

Her trial date has not been set. She is awaiting a decision from an appeals court that will determine if she qualifies for Wisconsin's affirmative defense law, which would allow her to argue that her crime was a direct result of the trafficking she says she experienced.

Kizer has said that Volar sold her to other men after she met him on Backpage, an online prostitution marketplace shuttered in 2018 for involvement in child sex trafficking. Under Wisconsin law, abuse alone qualifies as trafficking if the victim is underage.

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At the time of his death in June 2018, Volar had been under investigation for months. Police had arrested him that February on charges of child sexual assault but released him the same day. A raid of his home, according to authorities, revealed video evidence that Volar was sexually abusing multiple underage black girls, including one who appeared to be as young as 12.

That evidence had been turned over to the office of District Attorney Michael Graveley, who told The Washington Post last year that a sex crimes prosecutor was working to determine the identities and ages of the victims involved before rearresting Volar.

Graveley is the lead prosecutor in Kizer's case. He twice fought attempts to have her bond lowered, arguing that her actions show the killing was a calculated act. Minutes before Kizer fired the weapon she had brought to Volar's house, she downloaded a police scanner app, according to Graveley. Public opinion, including the 950,000 signatures on a petition asking him to drop the charges against her, will not sway him, he vowed.

The Kenosha News reported that Graveley has offered a plea deal that would require Kizer to plead guilty to felony murder and jumping bail, which could result in a sentence of up to 21 years.

At a hearing this month, Graveley said Kizer wrote to the judge indicating that she would like to take the deal. But Kizer's attorneys did not address the offer. They revealed that she contracted the novel coronavirus in April and argued that she should be released so she can seek therapy while she awaits trial. The judge denied their motion.

The bond fund reached out to Kizer's support committee soon afterward. In recent weeks, it had been receiving messages of support from people across the country who were learning about Kizer's case for the first time.

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“Within the last two weeks, people are noticing all the violence from police and they are connecting the dots to Chrystul,” said Santera Matthews, a Chrystul Kizer

Defense Committee organizer.

Matthews was there when Kizer left the Kenosha County Detention Facility on Monday afternoon. With her back to the jail, she hugged her mother for the first time in two years.

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Jessica Contrera is a reporter on The Washington Post's local enterprise team. She writes about people whose lives are being transformed by the major events and issues in the news. Follow 



