**Unloaded BB gun sends Black teen to prison for 33 years. Will Craigsville inmate be freed?**

[**Brad Zinn**](https://www.newsleader.com/staff/4395833002/brad-zinn/)

Staunton News Leader

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CRAIGSVILLE — Nick Robinson was still a juvenile when he entered prison for the first time in 2010.

Dropping his bags, the 17-year-old scanned the new surroundings of the dimly lighted cell block that stretched three tiers high and held 200 boisterous inmates.

"I looked around, and at that moment I just didn't know what to do," recalled Robinson, now 27. "It was fight-or-flight instincts, and my instincts told me to get a weapon."

He didn't get a weapon, but as he stood inside the Powhatan Correctional Center the realization was stark: Prison was his new home and it would be for a long, long time.

Prison life is all Robinson has known for the past dozen years. His story is one that is being told far too often these days, but one that could be told by thousands of other Black men across the nation who have been locked up for years if not decades, their punishments far outweighing their crimes against society.

Robinson is now an inmate at the Augusta Correctional Center in Craigsville, where he has been housed since 2014.

After 12 years of incarceration in various Virginia prisons, Robinson, a Richmond native, is hoping his story will be heard. Politicians are taking note, and there is an online petition with more than 100,000 signatures asking "to give Nick a second chance."

Robinson's crime? Providing an unloaded BB gun pistol to his accomplices, then manning the backdoor of a home during a break-in and subsequent robbery. Nobody was hurt during the crime as Robinson, who was unarmed, and his friends made off with some property.

Convicted of numerous felony charges in 2009, Robinson was sentenced to 33 years in prison as a teenager because of mandatory minimum sentences imposed by the state.

**Forced out, living with his sister**

When he was just 13, Robinson said he and his younger siblings had to move in with his older sister in south Richmond after their mother began living with a convicted sex offender, who was not permitted to have unsupervised contact with juveniles.

Robinson said he tried not to hold his mother's decision against her, but admits there were some lingering feelings at the time for being forced to move out. "It was more like a silent resentment, in a sense," he recently said during a phone interview from Augusta Correctional Center.

However, Robinson emphasized that he still loves his mother despite knowing that had the circumstances been different, odds are he wouldn't have been in the position he found himself in on the night his life was radically changed forever.

"I know she carries that guilt," Robinson said.

But being 13 and forced to live without any parenting was difficult at best. "It pushed me into this mode of survival and I hated that feeling, like you're going at it alone," Robinson said.

He tried prioritizing school, but it quickly fell off his radar and Robinson ended up repeating the eighth grade. "I started prioritizing living, being able to live week to week," he said. That included trying to obtain a fake ID card so he could land a construction job. "I did try that," Robinson said with a chuckle. "It didn't work at all."

Looking back on that period in his life, one can almost feel Robinson shaking his head as he speaks. "I'm like, what the hell? No kid should be in that situation," he said.

For almost two years as a young teen, he lived with his older sister and her two young children, along with his younger brother and sister. The six of them shared a two-bedroom apartment.

"She tried to keep me focused on doing kid things," said Robinson, who admitted that when his older sister wasn't around he'd do pretty much whatever he felt like doing.

The night of Dec. 12, 2008, was a Friday, and the choices Robinson made that evening as a 15-year-old boy have haunted him ever since.

**Impromptu home robbery**

It was two weeks before Christmas and three of Robinson’s friends were conversing in the kitchen of his apartment when he walked in and overheard them discussing a robbery and "talking about gettin' a lick," he said.

There was no elaborate, longterm planning for the scheme, just a quick, impromptu conversation among friends. With his sister struggling financially, Robinson didn't hesitate to tell them he was in.

"That decision, summed up in this little period of time, changed the next 30 years of my life," he said.

Robinson grabbed an unloaded BB gun pistol and handed it over to the others.

The group didn't have far to go. Their target was a home that sat next to Robinson's apartment complex, the closest residence to them and one where they thought they would find some fast cash.

Robinson stationed himself at the back door as the other three went into the home through a front door after a knock was answered. All four were wearing face coverings of some sort, he said.

Within less than a minute, the backdoor swung open. Robinson said he briefly stepped into the home and was handed some wallets, cash and a cell phone before the four of them sprinted away.

A victim who’d wrestled the BB gun away from one of the assailants tried firing at the group as they ran, Robinson learned at his trial. The unloaded BB gun was useless.

A child was in the home, according to the Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney's Office, and the BB gun was pointed at a woman's head.

Twenty minutes later, the police were at Robinson’s apartment asking questions. He immediately confessed his involvement but later recanted, thinking he could somehow wriggle free of the legal mess he'd found himself in.

"The truth was, I was guilty as hell," Robinson said. "No one wants to do time."

Robinson and Leon Brown, 19 years old at the time, were arrested. The two other accomplices were never caught. Tried and convicted, Brown is slated for release in 2024, DOC records show.

Robinson said he initially faced just one robbery charge and one gun charge in juvenile court before the prosecutor piled on the charges after he refused to plead guilty and accept a plea deal.

"The offer was for an indeterminate sentence within the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice. I declined that deal. The second offer was the day of trial. I cannot accurately recall the terms of that deal, but nevertheless I rejected that deal as well," Robinson said.

Robinson said he had a juvenile record prior to the home invasion. As a 12-year-old kid, he and another friend walked into an unlocked home and stole a gaming console and a shotgun.

"It was the first real gun we'd ever touched and for some reason believed it would be a great idea to take it from those folks' home," Robinson wrote in a 2017 pardon petition to the governor's office. He said he immediately gave the gun away to his older half-brother, Mike.

Two weeks later, during the holiday season of 2005, Robinson was playing video games with a buddy when Mike came into his bedroom and cut off the television.

"Let's go," Mike said.

"At this point it felt like we no longer had a choice," Robinson wrote in the pardon petition. Just 12 years old, he then helped his brother rob a pizza delivery driver.

He was probably right about not having a choice to go or not. When Robinson was 8, Mike once head-butted him so hard he had to receive 13 stitches in his forehead. Two years later, Mike shot his little brother in the head with a pellet gun. The pellet lodged near Robinson's right temporal lobe and he has worn a hearing aid ever since, he said.

Following Robinson's arrest for the 2008 armed robbery of the Richmond home, and after he rejected the plea offer, the Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney's Office opted to try him as an adult and slapped him with a robbery charge for each victim, seven in all. To go along with the seven robbery charges, he was also hit with eight charges of use of a firearm in the commission of a felony, each charge carrying a mandatory minimum of five years in prison, except for one, which was a mandatory three-year term. There was also a burglary charge.

At the conclusion of the 2009 jury trial, during closing arguments Robinson said Kelli Burnett, the prosecutor handling the case, reminded the court the robbery took place on a Friday, a typical payday for many workers, and argued that Robinson was looking for his own payday. Robinson said as Burnett spoke, he realized she was right.

"That stuck with me, her quote," he said.

After a jury convicted Robinson, and the prosecutor opted not to prosecute one of the firearm charges, the judge sentenced him to 33 years in prison because of the mandatory minimums that came with each of the seven gun convictions.

"It was the least that I could get," Robinson said. "I couldn't comprehend it."

Just 15 when he was arrested and 16 years old when sentenced as an adult to more than three decades behind bars, looking back, Robinson said it was an emotional time because with the lengthy sentence it seemed as if society had already decided he had nothing to give back despite his young age.

"I just felt like, that the door was shut on me, and I just felt like maybe I should have spoke up sooner," he said.

Robinson is speaking up now, along with his younger brother, Cory. Together, they hope that freedom for Nick will come sooner than later.

**Life without big brother**

Cory Robinson, just 14 when his older brother was convicted, said Nick's lengthy sentence impacted the entire family. He said he no longer had his brother to provide protection for him at school, didn't hear him cheering any longer from the sidelines at his youth league football games, nor was he there anymore to pal around with for hoop games at the neighborhood basketball courts. Their mother, who Cory said shows little emotion, also exhibited signs of being hurt.

"It was weird," Cory Robinson said when asked how it felt to have his brother yanked away from his life for so long.

But instead of waiting for the 33-year sentence to conclude, the two brothers started an [online petition at change.org](https://www.change.org/p/ralph-s-northam-give-nick-a-second-chance)seeking Robinson's release. So far, the petition has garnered more than 100,000 signatures. While appreciative of the support, Cory said he feels the petition by itself might not be enough to free his brother, so he's reached out to several politicians in an effort to educate them about the 2008 case.

"You can get as many people as you want," he said of the petition, "but once you get senators and delegates that walk behind you on it, it's a better look."

With that in mind, Cory recently emailed Sen. Joe Morrissey, D-Richmond, detailing his brother's plight. Days later, Morrissey spoke about Nick Robinson while addressing the senate. As he spoke, Morrissey noted that is costs anywhere from $30,000 to $40,000 per year to house an inmate in the Virginia Department of Corrections.

"I would ask — does the Commonwealth of Virginia benefit by incarcerating Nick for another 21 years at a cost of $40,000 a year? Or, based on the fact that this young man was 15 when he committed this, had no prior criminal record, do we think that this person warrants parole, perhaps a conditional pardon, a second chance in life, and should we not reevaluate mandatory minimum sentences?" Morrissey said.

**More:**[Community garden coming to Staunton near Montgomery Hall Park thanks to new nonprofit](https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/2021/03/15/community-garden-coming-staunton-near-montgomery-hall-park-thanks-new-nonprofit/4698842001/)

While incarcerated, Robinson has obtained his GED, taken classes through Washington & Lee University and is currently enrolled at Blue Ridge Community College in Weyers Cave.

Mandatory minimums, which were used to lock Robinson away at such a young age, are being eyed by the General Assembly which failed to take action this year. As it stands, there are 224 crimes in Virginia that require a mandatory minimum sentence, according to a January study by the Virginia Senate Crime Commission.

The study also noted that Black inmates, on average, have more mandatory minimum sentences than white inmates.

"I want to be able to be a family again," Robinson said when asked what he hopes to achieve if released early. "I look forward to that because my departure fractured my family."

He also said he'd like to engage his community in a positive way.

"Many of us have, unfortunately, committed our crimes, and we left our community in a worse way than we found it," Robinson said.

He remains behind bars with a release date of 2037.

***This article on Nick Robinson is the first in a series of articles that will focus on his sentence and efforts to gain his freedom.***

**After News Leader investigation, prosecutor decides to back release for long-haul prisoner**

[**Brad Zinn**](https://www.newsleader.com/staff/4395833002/brad-zinn/)

Staunton News Leader

CRAIGSVILLE — After an ongoing News Leader investigation, the same prosecutor's office that helped put Nick Robinson behind bars as a teen for more than three decades is now willing to back his bid to be released early from prison.

"We would support Mr. Robinson’s petition for clemency given his apparent remorse, his good behavior during incarceration, and his efforts to prepare himself to return to society as a peaceful and productive citizen," said Kelli Burnett, Richmond's deputy commonwealth's attorney.

It was seen as a stiff sentence for a crime where nobody was injured, especially in a case involving a young Black man — a segment of Virginia's population historically over-policed and slapped with more severe punishments than white defendants.

But does the Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney's Office share part of the blame for Robinson's harsh 33-year prison term?

It was Burnett who piled up the charges against Robinson — many of them carrying mandatory minimums prison terms — and then opted to prosecute him as an adult after initially only issuing two charges against him in juvenile court.

After a jury found Robinson guilty of the 2008 BB gun robbery (the gun was unloaded) and convicted him of nearly 20 charges, because of the way he was charged the judge had no option but to sentence him to the minimum of 33 years in prison. Robinson was just 16 years old when sentenced.

Some argue he was done in by what's known as the "trial tax."

In Virginia, when a defendant exercises their right to trial and dares to reject a prosecutor's offer, a complete about-face by the prosecutor can sometimes take place, as it did in Robinson's case.

Burnett said she had her reasons for charging Robinson the way she did, but few so much as blinked an eye when the young teenage boy was "disappeared" and ordered locked away for 33 years.

Twelve years later, Robinson, 28, remains in prison at the Augusta Correctional Center in Craigsville.

**Doing the crime, then lots of time**

There was no long-term planning of the robbery, just a small group of teens and young men scheming one night inside a Richmond apartment in December 2008.

At the time, Robinson had been staying with his older sister and her two small children for almost two years after his mother began living with a convicted sex offender. A younger brother and sister also resided in the cramped two-bedroom apartment.

Robinson handed an unloaded BB gun pistol to one of his accomplices and the four of them descended onto their chosen target — the closest house to Robinson's apartment complex.

The robbery of several individuals inside the home, including a child, was swift but not smooth. The BB gun was pointed at a woman's head before one of the victims wrestled the unloaded weapon away from one of the assailant's. Soon the group, with Robinson manning a backdoor the entire time, was off and running with a small amount of stolen property.

Within 20 minutes, officers from the Richmond Police Department were already at Robinson's apartment. He and a second accomplice, a 19-year-old, were arrested. Two others managed to avoid capture.

Robinson said he was initially charged as a juvenile with robbery and a gun charge.

But after rejecting a plea deal, Burnett chose to try him as an adult and slapped him with a robbery charge for each victim, seven in all. To go along with the seven robbery charges, he was also hit with eight charges of use of a firearm in the commission of a felony, each charge carrying a mandatory minimum of five years in prison, except for one, which was a mandatory three-year term. There was also a burglary charge.

While the case was still in juvenile court, Robinson said he was advised by his defense attorney, Robert Shrader Jr., not to take the first plea offer, which would have given him an indeterminate amount of time in the juvenile system. "He said don't take that, we're going to see how the preliminary hearing plays out," Robinson recalled.

After the prelim, Burnett hit Robinson with a slew of charges. He said a second offer was made the day of his trial.

"He advised that it was a pretty good plea," Robinson said of Shrader.

His mother thought he should take the second offer. But Robinson said Shrader, who died this year in March, also told him he had a 50/50 chance of beating the charges.

"I chose not to take it," said Robinson, [who doesn't deny that he was "guilty as hell."](https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/local/2021/03/16/black-teen-serving-extreme-virginia-prison-sentence-bb-gun-robbery/4402647001/)

Because his gun convictions carried mandatory minimums (one was dismissed), following his convictions in 2009 the judge had no option but to sentence Robinson, then just 16 years old, to 33 years in prison as an adult, the minimum amount she could possibly give him.

Fast-forward about a dozen years later and Robinson is still living in cramped quarters, only "home" is a cell with 72 square feet and a double bunk, a toilet and a sink he shares with his cellmate.

Inmates at Augusta Correctional are allowed a few belongings in their cell. One of them is a 15-inch TV, but it will put them back about $230.

"If your family's fortunate enough help you pay for that, because ain't no (prison) job gonna do that for you at 27 cents an hour," said Robinson, who shares his TV with his cellmate.

Inmates can buy fans from the prison commissary, which are much needed at Augusta Correctional Center during the hot months. One version is 8 inches for $40, and a smaller one that is 6 inches goes for $20. Robinson said the smaller version reminds him of the cheap hand-held fans that sprayed water when he was a child.

Mattresses are coveted, with some inmates trying to fool correctional officers by combining two for more comfort. It's almost impossible to convincingly conceal two mattresses together and inevitably they're always caught, Robinson said.

Inmates can only have as many commissary items in their property box — about 2 feet by 3 feet — that it can hold, according to Robinson. They can have some pictures on the wall, and are allowed up to 10 books. Certain book topics, however, are off limits, such as martial arts or computer science books.

"I'm at capacity with that," Robinson said. "Most of my books are educational."

He also gets a daily newspaper and said it helps him stay up on current events as well anything political in his former city of Richmond, where he hopes to one day run for city council.

"My plan is to intern with somebody in politics," said Robinson, who obtained his GED behind bars, works as a prison tutor and has taken several college courses. "I'm very serious about the political world."

But for now, he can only fantasize about being on the outside. And with prison comes time, time to think about lost loved ones — Robinson's father died in 2016 — and dreams of what could still be.

**Do prosecutors have too much power?**

Mandatory minimums, in Robinson's case and in many others, are to blame for his disproportionate sentence. Without the mandatory minimums, the judge could have decided Robinson's fate once he was convicted. Instead, the judge was cut out of the decision-making process because of Burnett's decision to hit him with so many charges that carried mandatory minimums.

"Once the prosecutor decides to invoke it, it's over," said Kevin Ring, president of the Washington D.C.-based Families Against Mandatory Minimums. "Every other system actor is cut out. Even the jury is not allowed to know that the defendant is facing a mandatory sentence."

According to Ring, mandatory minimums have given prosecutors too much power, and he said they often abuse this power when a defendant opts to take their case to trial instead of accepting a plea deal. In other words, if a suspect doesn't play ball with the prosecutor, they get hammered for exercising their constitutional right to have a trial. Ring said it's commonly known as the "trial tax."

"That is not how that's supposed to work. That has no relation to justice," he said.

Ring said the following example happens far too often: a prosecutor offers a defendant a three-year plea deal, but when the defendant turns down the offer and opts to go to trial, the prosecutor then slaps them with a charge that carries a 15-year mandatory minimum.

"That 12-year delta has nothing to do with public safety," Ring said.

The system, as it is currently set up, has made the courtroom trial a rare occurrence and made the criminal courts a system of pleas, according to Ring.

"This is how they get plea deals, is because of the coercion that comes with threatening those longer sentences. It's why 97 percent of all criminal cases end in plea deals. There's no trials anymore — the trial is disappearing. But for the public that watches 'Law & Order' and sees every case start with an investigation and end with a trial, that's just not how it works," he said. "You have a right to put the government to its proof. You should just be able to go to trial, that's the right you have."

Ring said mandatory minimums have always been part of the penal code, at both the state and federal levels, but he said they proliferated during the 1980s and 1990s during an effort to "get tough" on crime and to rectify what some deemed lenient sentencing by judges.

"All it did was change who decided the sentence, because now it's the prosecutor who decides when and against whom to bring a mandatory charge," Ring noted.

Ring, who spent 20 months in federal prison after being ensnared in the Jack Abramoff investigation more than a decade ago, wasn't always against mandatory minimums, and said he helped draft new laws as a staffer on Capitol Hill in the late 1990s that instituted mandatory minimums for meth dealers.

"Back then, I thought prison and sentencing reform were problems that only plagued 'others' — the bad people, the wayward children from broken homes, the criminal class.

"I ended up serving time with people whose unnecessarily long sentences were caused by the laws I helped write," he told USA TODAY in 2018.

Ring said another issue in cases like Robinson's is "sentence inflation," and he said Americans have become de-sensitized to lengthy prison terms, be it a child who is given three decades in prison as an adult for a crime where there were no injuries, or a drug courier who gets a quarter of a century for shipping methamphetamine.

"Thirty-three years doesn't sound bad in a country where we're giving out 25 years for drug offenses," Ring said. "It's nuts in any rational world. Sentence inflation has made us numb."

Nicole Porter, a spokesperson for The Sentencing Project in Washington, D.C., said the trial tax is a "stain on the United States" and something that happens regularly in Virginia because prosecutors are abusing their powers. She said Robinson's case is not unusual.

"I'm sure in every courthouse across the state there are similar examples of young men who have been disappeared behind Virginia's prison walls and have been subjected to an extreme amount of time," Porter said. "The idea that prosecutors would abuse their authority to create case outcomes (where) they have all the advantages is abhorrent."

Porter said because Black people are over-policed in general, the trial tax has had a disproportionate impact on Black defendants. "Race is a huge factor," she said.

**Virginia prosecutor responds to sentencing**

Burnett said she initially charged Robinson based on the evidence police had gathered at that point in the investigation.

"The victims in the case did not speak English, and not all of them were interviewed by responding officers on the night of the robbery. It took some time for the detective to conduct full interviews with the assistance of a Spanish interpreter," she said in an email to The News Leader.

Burnett labeled the crime a "terrifying experience," and said home invasions can be extremely traumatic for victims. The prosector said after Robinson rejected the first offer and pleaded not guilty, she moved forward with additional charges that "were reviewed and approved by supervisors."

But why so many charges when initially Robinson only faced two as a juvenile?

"A prosecutor must prepare for all of the risks that come with trial," Burnett said in the email. "These include the possibility that some witnesses will not be available after several months, or that a jury will convict on some charges but not others."

Stacking the deck, she slapped Robinson with the seven robbery charges, eight gun charges with mandatory minimums and a burglary charge.

"Mr. Robinson was represented by an experienced attorney who specialized in juvenile criminal matters, and who would have explained the severity of potential outcomes to his client," Burnett said.

Robinson remains buried under the convictions.

**Dreams of family dinners, Disney**

While Robinson is making the most of his time behind bars by tutoring, taking classes, educating himself in his downtime, mentoring inmates, writing poetry, working on his mental health and trying to stay focused on the present, there are times when his mind delves into his past.

He dares to imagine a future beyond his prison walls. Robinson regrets that he longer has his father's brain to pick for advice. He also relishes the chance to go to another family reunion.

"I wish I would have taken advantage of them more," he said.

If and when he does get released, Robinson plans to do some traveling, and would especially like to experience a cruise. "I always wanted to go on a Disney cruise!" he said, unable to mask his excitement.

Another thing Robinson misses is family dinners on Sundays, something that despite their economic circumstances was a regular event at his sister's apartment before he was locked up.

But, for now, Robinson remains behind bars at Augusta Correctional Center. Because of the pandemic, he hasn't seen anyone in his family for more than a year as the DOC has yet to resume visitations.

During visits with family, Robinson said it's the one time inmates can relax and be themselves, and for a brief moment in time they can almost forget they are prisoners of the state. That's the upside to visitation. The tremendous downside is catching that last glimpse of family when they leave.

"That's when the moment of reality hits," Robinson said. "It's almost like when the judge tells you 'rise' (and) you hear the verdict. And when you hear it, and you're going to prison ... you look back and the last people you see is the people you love."

**Seeking an assist from Gov. Northam**

To help earn his freedom and get him back into the community, Robinson has reached out to John Coggeshall, a Norfolk attorney who specializes in securing pardons for inmates who are wrongly held for disproportionately long sentences when compared to their crimes.

Coggeshall was instrumental in helping getting pardons for four Virginia inmates the past few years, all of whom were serving either life sentences or decades behind bars for their crimes, including [Travis May, who was interviewed in 2018 for a News Leader article.](https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/local/2018/08/02/innocence-project-wants-judge-re-open-22-year-old-murder-conviction/812057002/)

Like many other pardon petitions that have been sent to the governor's office in years past, Coggeshall said Robinson's 2017 request has not been granted or denied.

"Nobody seems to know what happens to them," he said of the petitions.

Coggeshall said he re-filed Robinson's pardon petition with at least 20 additional exhibits in an effort to sway the governor. The only other option that Coggeshall said he has is that he can seek Robinson's parole after 20 years thanks to a new law signed in 2020 by Gov. Ralph Northam. The law allows those who were sentenced for crimes they committed before they were 18 a chance for parole eligibility after two decades. That means Robinson, if not pardoned, will have to wait another eight years for a parole hearing.

"Looking across the board, his best option is a governor's conditional pardon," according to Coggeshall.

Coggeshall said Robinson's sentence "shocks the conscience," a legal phrase in the U.S. that judges can use to intervene in an effort to remedy a case. He isn't shocked, though, that Burnett chose to charge him so harshly.

"It's difficult to get upset with commonwealth's attorneys, that's their job," he said. "It's not their job to be sympathetic or empathetic. Their job, what they get paid for, is to represent the victims."

*Brad Zinn is the cops, courts and breaking news reporter at The News Leader. Have a news tip? Or something that needs investigating? You can email reporter Brad Zinn (he/him) at**bzinn@newsleader.com**. You can also follow him on*[*Twitter*](https://twitter.com/nl_safemoving?lang=en)*.*

**Craigsville's cop saved 2 tiny sisters no one else could find: 2020 Newsmaker Corey Wood**

[**Brad Zinn**](https://www.newsleader.com/staff/4395833002/brad-zinn/)

Staunton News Leader

CRAIGSVILLE — The entirety of the Craigsville Police Department comes down to one man.

His name is Corey Wood.

Chief Wood is the town's lone patrolman, draws up the police budget, represents the department in city meetings, handles secretarial work, procures the law enforcement equipment and does anything else that's needed to keep the police department up and running.

And despite Wood being the only cop on the town's police force, you can add one more job description to his resume — lifesaver.

On a hunch, it was Wood who in early June set out to find a Craigsville family that had been reported missing, resulting in the rescue of two young children still strapped to their child safety seats nearly 20 hours after their mother slammed her GMC Envoy into a tree.

Wood is a News Leader 2020 Newsmaker — part of our annual series highlighting people who are not always in the headlines but make a difference in our community.

**Back to policing**

A self-described "country person," Wood grew up in the Churchville-Swoope area and attended Buffalo Gap High School.

After spending about two years as an officer with the Staunton Police Department, in 2016 he left policing altogether and went back to his old job driving a tow truck for Kyle's Towing.

But Wood wasn't ready to give up on a law enforcement career, and when a sergeant position opened up at the Craigsville Police Department in 2018 (it was a two-person department back then), he jumped at the opportunity.

About a year later, Wood was named chief.

“It’s quite a different way of policing in comparison to working at a larger department,” he said.

Wood is technically the town's lone officer, but he made it clear he's not alone.

While there are situations where backup, usually the Augusta County Sheriff's Office, can be 20 or 30 minutes away, often some Craigsville residents who routinely listen to police scanners show up at a scene. Wood doesn't want citizens taking matters into their own hands because of safety and liability issues, but said he appreciates it nonetheless.

“That’s nice knowing in the back of your mind that you’ve got that with the community," he said.

It's not just Wood who has been a beneficiary. Recently, he said a Virginia State Police trooper was struggling with a suspect in the middle of a Craigsville Street when some residents waded in to help.

“Some of the townspeople saw what was going on, and they jumped right in and helped him to get that guy detained," Wood said. "It’s the definition of small-town America out there.”

**Saving lives**

On June 8, a Monday, Wood was at home and not working that particular day when he saw a TV news report about a missing Craigsville woman, 25-year-old Desirae Sherwood, and her two young daughters, Gracie Washington, 5, and Violet Washington, 1.

“When the picture popped up, I knew who they were," Wood said.

He also knew there was no reason for the family or children to be missing. His mind then instinctively raced back to his previous job.

“Knowing the area from when I drove a tow truck, there are a lot of areas between Buffalo Gap and Craigsville where you can go off the road and nobody would know that you were off the road because the ravines are deep," Wood said. "And at that time of the year, the undergrowth and the leaves on the trees are so thick you can’t even see off the highway.”

Wood got dressed, hopped in his police car and headed west toward Craigsville. He spoke to an Augusta County Sheriff's Office supervisor and got additional details concerning the missing family, including which cell tower registered Sherwood's last ping.

**More:**[Makeba Robinson, mentor and community leader: 2020 News Leader Newsmakers](https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/2020/12/24/makeba-robinson-mentor-and-community-leader-news-leader-newsmakers/6391002002/)

Wood said he first stopped at a church on Parkersburg Turnpike, where he parked his police vehicle. Walking along the side of the road, he headed westward for about 200 yards or so until he could barely see his car, switched sides and scoured the other side of the road as he came back toward his parked car.

“I did that all the way to Augusta Springs," Wood said.

As he got into Augusta Springs, Wood said he remembered a particularly rough stretch of road from his towing days between Katie Drive and the Augusta Springs Post Office, where vehicles routinely slide off the road in the winter.

He checked one side of the road and found nothing. After crossing the road, Wood said the evening sun, which was sitting at a low angle in the sky, caught something in the nearby brush about 25 to 30 feet down an embankment.

“I saw something twinkle in the undergrowth," Wood recalled.

As he moved closer, he saw a roof rack. The green-colored GMC, however, was still almost completely covered as the tall brush it had run over had already popped back up, concealing the vehicle.

“Nobody could see down in there," Wood said.

**More:**[David Fosnocht, Augusta Health ER doctor: Why I'm Taking the Vaccine](https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/2020/12/23/david-fosnocht-augusta-health-er-doctor-why-im-taking-vaccine/4011148001/)

Making his way toward the vehicle, which had struck a tree, Wood said he spotted Sherwood in the driver's seat. Once he reached the GMC, he said, it was clear she was dead. Wood said he shined a flashlight onto the backseat, where the two children were sleeping in their child safety seats.

Gracie awoke first, and Wood told her to hold on tightly as he carried her out of the brush. As he got up to the road, a Craigsville resident who regularly scans police radio communications was already at the scene to offer any assistance. Wood gave him the child and told him to take her back to his vehicle for air-conditioning and water.

"I know this gentlemen personally or I wouldn’t have given someone a child, a random stranger," Wood noted.

He went back into the brush, used a pry bar to wedge a door open and pulled the infant from her seat. But as he traversed the steep embankment, Wood fell, knocking the wind out of him and forcing him to stay on the ground for a couple of minutes until his breathing returned to normal.

"The worst I've ever had the wind knocked out of me," Wood admitted.

Miraculously, the children were unharmed. Wood said despite temperatures that reached 82 degrees that day, a back window in the GMC was shattered when the vehicle initially hit the tree nearly head-on, providing a lifeline to the two girls.

“That gave those kids some air circulation," Wood said.

It is believed Sherwood crashed her vehicle the night before around midnight, meaning the children were left to fend for themselves for nearly 20 hours.

The chief said the situation, while tragic, could have been worse. These days, Wood said he's grown closer to the children's family.

"They're very nice people," he said. "You couldn't ask for nicer people."

Wood says he also does patrols at Craigsville Elementary School, where Gracie is a student.

"So I make sure she's doing good in her classes and all," Wood said. "It's a bad situation that turned out as best as it could."

*Have questions or a tip? Email Brad Zinn at**bzinn@newsleader.com**. You can also follow him on*[*Twitter*](https://twitter.com/nl_safemoving?lang=en)*.*