



Former auto dealer Antoinette Frink (center) with her sister Alphae Snicale (left) and Arlena Sawyers, the reporter at *Automotive News* who followed Frink's ordeal for the past few years. Frink was released from prison Jan. 20 after serving 11 1/2 years.

life that the customer is right, and you treat them with respect. I mean, drugs are a scourge, but it's sad that people who work for the government would (prosecute me), even when they know it's wrong. Even my prosecutor said that if I had had good representation, I would not have gone to jail."

At the trial, she was not represented by her current attorney, Ross Nabatoff, a partner with the Washington, D.C., firm of Brand and Frulla. Her lawyer now for nearly a decade, Nabatoff now hopes to clear Frink's name. Since hers was a sentence commutation — not a pardon — she will remain under court supervision for the next five years. He hopes Frink's situation sheds light on what he sees as a larger problem within the criminal justice system.

"These are horror stories; the federal system has innumerable numbers of people who are serving harsh sentences, long periods of incarceration, for at best minimal roles in drug offenses," said Nabatoff, who'd submitted last December a clemency petition to the United States Department of Justice on Frink's behalf.

"The sentence itself is ludicrous. Though Frink is innocent, it's just a shame that you can get reduced sentences if you have information on other people, but people on the periphery, those who don't know anyone, they don't have any information. People

who can cut a deal, do. The other people are sort of hosed." The alleged drug dealers to whom Frink's cars were sold were reportedly released soon after offering info on higher-ups in the drug trade.

Knowing the likelihood that Frink would do time, and do a lot of it, Nabatoff wishes he'd been around to talk Frink into a plea. But she'll have none of that.

"Listen, I had been in San Francisco at the (National Automobile Dealers Association meeting), and got a call from the dealership attorney," Frink said. "It was just bizarre. I'm thinking, so what? They bought the cars from me. I thought once it got to court it would be thrown out.

"So, I'm not thinking plea, no way, because I'm not guilty, and besides that, I didn't really know about the guidelines. The only way I would have pled was if I could have seen the future and known that my daughter would die." Frink's only child, Trina, a college senior, was killed in a traffic accident while returning to Clark Atlanta University after visiting her mom in prison.

Nabatoff said though Frink is part of a group of about 20 whose sentences were reduced, he does not consider her commutation controversial or worthy of skeptical scrutiny. Said Frink: "He didn't give a reason (for her commuta-

tion) but, in general, I think the president heard my name a lot. Thanks to Ross, some of the media and others, there just was a massive synergy toward the end there."

Joining the fray to free Frink was The National Association of Minority Automobile Dealers, the Georgia Automobile Dealers Association, Families Against Mandatory Minimums, and automotive trade publication *Automotive News*.

While in prison, Frink had been a hospice volunteer and a member of the suicide watch, and had taught other inmates to read. She'd also helped to get the American Red Cross to certify inmates as HIV/AIDS instructors. As for the future, Frink is keeping an open mind.

"I'm just trying to get my bearings," she says. "I know the (automotive) industry, but I worked really hard to keep my dealership successful. I'm not sure I can do that anymore, though some day I might. And, you know, there are laws regarding felons.

"But you know, I'm not bitter. I'm disappointed. I still hurt. But I'm not the only one. Not at all. This has happened to a lot of people. Auto dealers have become a lot more stringent after what happened to me.

"I just, well, I just hope my story helps."