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Hialeah's 'junkyard millionaire' freed from prison after coronavirus infection

BY JAY WEAVER

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Raul Sosa Sr. is pictured with his family after he is released from the Federal Correctional Institution in South Miami-Dade on Thursday. *HANDOUT*



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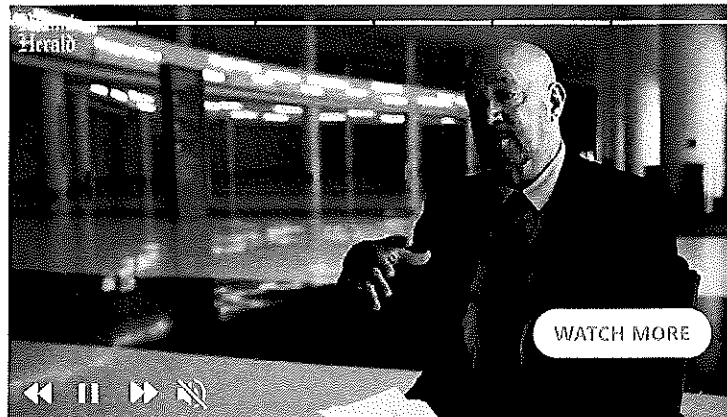
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Raul Sosa Sr., once dubbed Hialeah's "junkyard millionaire," has been released early from his nine-year prison sentence for tax evasion and bribery after being infected with the coronavirus during his incarceration.

Sosa Sr., a 57-year-old diabetic who was hospitalized with COVID-19 over the summer, was freed from the Federal Correctional Institution-Miami on Thursday with three years left on his prison sentence, his defense attorney said Friday.

Sosa won his freedom after asking the federal Bureau of Prisons to release him under a policy issued by Attorney General William Barr that allows eligible inmates during the pandemic to end their sentences and serve the balance of their terms at home.

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"He has severe health issues, but I hope he will be OK and can turn his life around," said Miami attorney Paul Petruzzi, who worked on Sosa's petition with partner Beatriz Vazquez.

Sosa's release by the Bureau of Prisons was significant because Miami federal judge Jose Martinez had denied his request for "compassionate release" in August because he viewed him as a repeat criminal offender.

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Petruzzi said that he had been corresponding with FCI-Miami and the Bureau of Prison for months to obtain Sosa's release and it finally paid off this week. He said an earlier request to the Bureau of Prisons had been denied.

Before his downfall, Sosa had owned a junkyard and towing business in Hialeah and lived with his family in Miami Springs.

In 2018, Sosa Sr. and his son, Raul Sosa Jr., pleaded guilty to paying bribes to an Opa-locka politician and a city lobbyist to obtain a towing contract. Sosa Sr. was sentenced to 2 1/2 years for that offense.

Both father and son admitted paying \$10,000 in 2015 to then-City Commissioner Luis Santiago and lobbyist Dante Starks in an FBI corruption investigation at Opa-locka City Hall. Santiago and Starks were also convicted in the bribery conspiracy.

The payoff arrangement was organized in a meeting between the Sosas, Santiago and Starks after the city sought bids from towing contractors, federal prosecutors said.

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Sosa Sr. committed the bribery offense while he was free on bond facing charges in a tax-evasion case that went to trial.

In 2016, Raul Sosa Sr. and his wife, Maura, were convicted of tax evasion because of their failure to report millions of dollars in income from his Hialeah tow-truck and scrap-metal business. The company, Accion 1 Auto Sales, raked in almost \$29 million in revenue from 2004-08, but the Sosas were hiding much of that income from the federal government by reporting only a fraction of their actual sales during the five-year period.

The Sosas, who failed to report at least \$4.5 million in business profits to the Internal Revenue Service, were sentenced to prison terms of 6 1/2 and four years, respectively. The couple owed \$1.5 million in federal income taxes.



Miami lawyer Philip Reizenstein explains the challenges federal prison inmates have in trying to get out of prison to avoid catching the coronavirus behind bars. BY PHILIP REIZENSTEIN | PIERRE TAYLOR

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Raul Sosa Sr.



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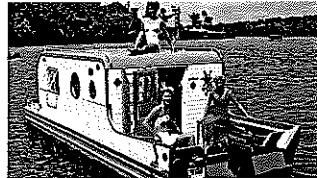
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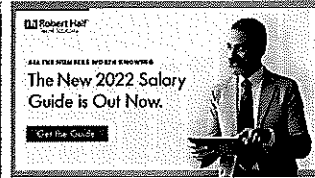
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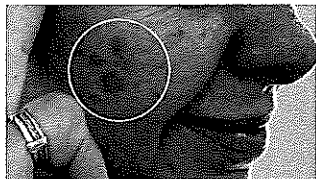
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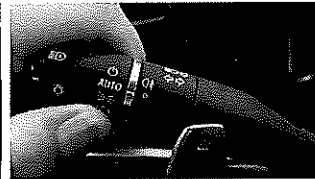
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