

On the moonless night of Nov. 15, 2002, five young boys ran across a park, jumped a 61-year-old man, bound his wrists, duct-taped his mouth, and beat him with pipes until his heart stopped.

All for his wallet. That man was Nathaniel Jones, the grandfather of future NBA star Chris Paul.

Today, those boys are men, sitting in prisons across the state of North Carolina, some serving 14-year terms, some life. On the TV sets in their prison rec rooms this week, the Hornets point guard has been wrecking the Los Angeles Lakers, averaging nearly a triple-double, the shiniest star of these playoffs.

The five are all about the same age as Paul, same race, same height, and from the same hometown.

They have one other thing in common with Chris Paul: All six wish they were free.

Paul, now 25, said: "These guys were 14 and 15 years old, with a lot of life ahead of them. I wish I could talk to them and tell them, 'I forgive you. Honestly.' I hate to know that they're going to be in jail for such a long time. I hate it."

Whose heart has that much room?

Paul's attitude stuns one of the defense attorneys who appealed the verdict and lost.

"I've probably tried 30 homicide cases," says Paul Herzog, of Fayetteville. "It's very rare for a family survivor in a murder case to feel that way. You just don't see that ever. That's incredibly generous of Mr. Paul."

To understand how generous, you have to know how close Paul was to his granddad.

The man everybody called "PaPa Chili" was the first black man to open a service station in North Carolina and both Chris and his brother worked at it. PaPa Chili was known to let people run tabs when times got tough. Plenty of times, he'd hand people money out of the cash register to get by. Paul called him "my best friend."

The day Paul signed with nearby Wake Forest, the first person to put a Demon Deacons hat on him was his grandfather. The next day, he was dead.

None of the five boys were particularly hardened criminals. Only Cauthen had been previously arrested -- twice for running away and once for stealing his mom's car. They decided they wanted to rob somebody. Around the corner, in his white van, came that somebody -- Jones. He'd closed the filling station and was now getting grocery bags out of his van. "Let's go get him," one of them said. They sprinted across Belview Park and jumped him.

Using tape they'd bought that day at a drugstore, they bound his head, neck and hands and began a "relentless, remorseless, conscienceless" attack, according to the judge who sentenced them. Jones died in his carport.

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Paul, a high school senior, was so woebegone he was literally sick. Two days later, he scored 61 points for West Forsyth High School, one for every year of Papa Chili's life. He purposely missed a free throw at the end, then collapsed into the arms of his father in tears.

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"Even though I miss my granddad," Paul told me, "I understand that he's not coming back. At the time, it made me feel good when I heard they went away for life. But now that I'm older, when I think of all the things I've seen in my life? No, I don't want it. I don't want it."

This is the kind of man Chris Paul is: He was president of his high school class all three years. When LeBron James' girlfriend had a baby, James made sure Paul was there. He's so humble that if you didn't know who he was, you'd swear he was the pool man.

So what can Paul do? He can appeal to the governor of North Carolina, & ask for their sentences to be commuted. North Carolina is not big on commuting murderers' sentences, but I'd put nothing past the powers of Paul.

This kid floors me. Not just with the way he can dominate an NBA playoff game at 6 feet tall in elevator sneakers. Not just for the way he can twist Kobe Bryant into a Crazy Straw. Not just for the way he'd rather pass through a doughnut hole than take the shot himself.

No, what floors me about Chris Paul is his humanity. If strangers had bound my weak-hearted grandfather, beat him for no reason and killed him for the cash in his wallet -- strangers who to this day have not shown a thimbleful of contrition -- I'd want them in prison 100 years after they were in the dirt.

Chris Paul once wrote that his grandfather "taught me more things than I could ever learn with a Ph.D." One of them must've been love.