

Ohio man exonerated after almost four decades of wrongful imprisonment

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28 March 2015

Last November, Ricky Jackson was exonerated of murder charges after spending 39 years, 3 months and 9 days in prison. Jackson is believed to have been imprisoned longer than any other person ever exonerated in US history. He and codefendants Wiley and Ronnie Bridgeman wrongfully served a combined 100 years in prison.

On March 19, an Ohio Court of Claims ordered the state to pay Jackson \$1,008,055 in compensation for the decades he wrongfully spent behind bars. The Bridgeman brothers have yet to receive any compensation, as they have not filed the required civil lawsuit against the state for unknown reasons.

The three were convicted for the 1975 murder of Harold Franks in Cleveland, Ohio, based on the testimony of Eddie Vernon, who claimed to have witnessed them carrying out the attack. Vernon, who was only 12 years old at the time of the trial, recanted his testimony last year, admitting that police coerced him into testifying against Jackson and the Bridgeman brothers.

Vernon had been in a school bus roughly a block from the scene of the crime, from which none of his classmates had witnessed the attack. Shortly thereafter, he heard rumors that the three men were responsible for the murder, and thought he was “doing the right thing” by acting as a witness.

Vernon attempted to recant his testimony just before the trial, but police threatened to arrest his parents for his perjury since Vernon was too young to be charged himself. He ultimately testified against all three codefendants and his testimony was the only evidence that led to the guilty verdict.

At a hearing in November 2014, Vernon stated that his entire childhood testimony was based on lies provided by the police, saying “I don’t have any

knowledge about what happened at the scene of the crime...Everything was a lie. They were all lies.”

On Thursday, three other men who have spent a combined 54 years in prison saw their murder convictions overturned. Derrick Wheatt, Laurese Glover and Eugene Johnson all witnessed the 1995 murder of 19-year-old Clifton Hudson Jr. in East Cleveland, Ohio, and claim to have quickly left the scene for fear of their own safety. They each provided a matching description of the shooter to that given by other witnesses, but were themselves charged with the crime.

They were convicted a year later due to another witness, 14-year-old Tamika Harris, claiming she saw the shooter enter and exit their vehicle, but did not see the shooter’s face. At the trial, she identified Eugene Johnson as the shooter. Now an adult, Harris recently admitted that she could not see the shooter’s face, that she never actually saw someone enter or exit the truck, and that police had manipulated her into identifying Johnson as the shooter.

The three men will go through a trial to finalize their exoneration. When released, they will bring the total number of exonerations brought about through the work of the Ohio Innocence Project to 23. Collectively, these 23 individuals spent over 500 years behind bars in Ohio prisons for crimes they did not commit.

The Innocence Project, founded in 1992, works to exonerate wrongfully convicted prisoners across the US, often through DNA testing. The organization has been involved in 173 of the 317 total DNA exonerations in the US, with most of the remainder arising from the work of other groups affiliated with the Innocence Network.

On their web site, the Innocence Project notes that since 1989, there have been 329 post-conviction DNA

exonerations in the US, with most coming after 2000. Roughly a third of those found innocent were between the ages of 14 and 22 when they were wrongfully arrested, and many had no prior criminal record.

Eighteen prisoners on death row have been proven innocent and exonerated through DNA testing, spanning 11 different states in the US. Combined, they have served 229 years in prison—including 202 years on death row.

On March 11, 2014 Glenn Ford, 64, was exonerated of murder charges and released from Angola prison in Louisiana after spending 26 years on death row. He had been on death row since August 1988, after being convicted of murder in the 1983 killing of Isadore Rozeman.

Earlier this month, Ford filed two civil lawsuits against the state of Louisiana. The first singles out Caddo Parish prosecutors, the city of Shreveport, police department members, and the city's former coroner as playing crucial roles in securing Ford's wrongful conviction. The lawsuit alleges that detectives "fabricated" the sole piece of evidence used against Ford and "made deliberate or reckless falsifications and omissions of evidence."

The second lawsuit focuses on the prison's denial of medical care for a cancer diagnosis that became terminal while Ford was in Angola. It asserts that seven Angola prison wardens, five doctors associated with the prison and other prison officials and doctors ignored Ford's disease and denied him cancer treatment after a 2011 test that showed "a cancer-indicating marker in Ford's blood." After his release from Angola, Ford was diagnosed with Stage 3 lung cancer, which in the past year has progressed to Stage 4, spreading to other organs and requiring numerous treatments.

This Monday, Debra Milke, 51, was exonerated of a murder conviction from 1990, after spending 22 years on death row in Arizona. Her conviction was overturned by an appeals court in 2013, which ruled that prosecutors failed to disclose the lead detective's long history of misconduct.

Milke was convicted based solely on the confession she gave to Armando Saladate, who was found by the appeals court to have lied under oath in multiple other cases and to have repeatedly violated suspects' rights during interrogations. The appeals court also found that Saladate was once given a five-day suspension for

sexual misconduct.

In response to these heinous revelations, Milke has sued the city of Phoenix, Maricopa County as well as several individuals, alleging violations of her civil rights, the denial of her constitutional right to a fair trial, and malicious prosecution.

Since 1989, there have been a total of 1,570 exonerations in the US. There were a record 125 exonerations in 2014, significantly higher than the previous record in 2013 of 91. The rate has been increasing steadily in recent years due to advances in DNA testing.

Roughly 60 percent of those exonerated receive compensation, with a median compensation from states of roughly \$24,000 per year of time served. Presently, 20 states in the US have no statutes requiring payments to those who were wrongfully imprisoned. Outside of monetary compensation, those cleared and released are guaranteed no other support for basic necessities of life, including food assistance, help securing affordable housing, health care and counseling services, or job skills training.

On their web site, the Innocence Project notes that "Despite their proven innocence, the difficulty of reentering society is profound for the wrongfully convicted; the failure to compensate them adds insult to injury."



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