

California man wrongfully convicted freed after nearly 40 years

Trévon Austin
25 November 2017

After 39 years of wrongful imprisonment, a California man was released on Wednesday. Craig Richard Coley, 70, was convicted in 1978 for the murder of his ex-girlfriend and her four-year-old son. California Governor Jerry Brown ordered Coley's immediate release from a state prison in Lancaster based on the results of a new investigation that demonstrated he was wrongly convicted.

Coley was arrested on November 11, 1978 after 24-year old Rhonda Wicht and her four-year old, Donald Wicht, were found dead in her apartment in Simi Valley. Rhonda Wicht was strangled with a macramé rope and Donald Wicht was smothered to death. Investigators quickly identified Coley as a suspect because he had broken up with Wicht shortly before she was killed.

According to a news release issued by the police chief and district attorney, Coley's first trial in 1979 resulted in a hung jury after jurors failed to resolve an impasse that left them deadlocked 10-2 in favor of a guilty verdict. Coley was tried again in 1980, found guilty, and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Coley, a Vietnam War navy veteran, has always maintained his innocence. He appealed to Governor Brown for clemency and Brown ordered a review of the case in 2015. Brown said that former law enforcement officials felt that Coley was wrongfully convicted or framed.

Coley's request for clemency was supported by Simi Valley Police Chief David Livingstone and Ventura County District Attorney Gregory Totten, who said they could not stand by the evidence used to convict Coley. The trial court had ordered evidence destroyed after Coley exhausted his appeals, but investigators received records from Coley's relatives and found biological samples at a private lab.

According to Simi Valley Police, biological evidence that was previously thought to be lost or destroyed was discovered at a private laboratory. The evidence, which police have not described, was tested using advanced technology, not available at the time of the original trial, and did not have any trace of Coley's DNA.

"This case is tragic," Livingstone and Totten wrote in a news release. "An innocent woman and small child were murdered. Craig Coley has spent 39 years in custody for a crime he likely did not commit."

"Reviewing the case in light of the new evidence, we no longer have confidence in the weight of the evidence used to convict Mr. Coley," Simi Valley police and Ventura County prosecutors said in a joint statement earlier this week. The pair called the case tragic and said they will seek to determine if they can figure out who killed the mother and child nearly 4 decades ago.

Coley had no criminal history, and Governor Brown suggested that he might have been framed. "The grace with which Mr. Coley has endured his lengthy and unjust incarceration is extraordinary," Brown wrote. "I grant this pardon because Mr. Coley did not commit these crimes."

Speaking to NBC News following his release Coley said, "How can you feel when someone just reaches in and takes four decades out of your life?" He has been assigned a public defender and will seek compensation for the time he was unjustly incarcerated.

According to The Innocence Project, more than 350 people have been exonerated by new technology for DNA testing in the United States since 1989. The organization is dedicated to helping those wrongfully convicted - the organization itself has been involved in 183 DNA exonerations - and offers demographics on the cases.

On average, the wrongfully accused have spent 14

years in prison before they were proven innocent. The total number of years served by those exonerated by DNA evidence amounts to 4,788. Those wrongfully convicted have an average age of 26.5 at the time they were arrested, age 42.5 when they were set free. Some 71 percent of cases involved eyewitness misidentification of suspects.

The National Registry of Exonerations has recorded 2,120 exonerations since 1989, involving mistaken identification, false confessions, bad forensic evidence, perjury, and official misconduct. The total amount of time served comes to 18,454 years, with an average of 8.7 years per case. The states with the most exonerations include Texas (332), New York (250), California (190), and Illinois (203).



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact