



Jeff Deskovic

An Emotional Night At The Innocence Project's Second Annual Gala Dinner

On May 7, 2008, The Innocence Project held its second annual fundraising Gala Dinner. The Innocence Project is a not-for-profit organization that works to exonerate wrongfully convicted prisoners in those cases in which DNA testing can prove innocence. They also work towards bringing about legislative changes to prevent wrongful convictions in the first place. There have been 215 people across the country who have been exonerated through DNA evidence. Over 150 of those cases were personally worked on by The Innocence Project.

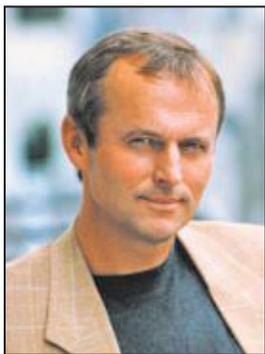
Such work, of course, requires money. The attorneys and other staff members must be paid a salary in order to focus full-time on the cases, as do the people who work on policy. Beyond that, there is other overhead, and other costs of litigation. Additionally, as a tactic that has sometimes worked in overcoming prosecutorial objections to the testing based on cost, The Innocence Project also offers to pay for the testing.

The focus of the evening was to show previous donors the result of their work, with the purpose of encouraging them to continue making contributions, while at the same time raising money to cover the event.

Celebrated author John Grisham, who is also an attorney, was the guest of honor. The evening was billed as a "Celebration of Justice and Freedom."

Grisham had written a book entitled "The Innocent Man", which was the story of Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz, who had been wrongfully convicted of murder in Oklahoma. The book has been responsible for raising the awareness of countless people

across the country about wrongful convictions. In addition, Grisham serves on the board of directors of The Innocence Project, and has helped raised funds for the Mississippi Innocence Project. He has also lectured about wrongful convictions around the country.



John Grisham

Grisham was invited to speak. He spoke of how he came to write the book, and mentioned that he had read the following obituary in *The New York Times*, written by Jim Dwyer:

Ronald Williamson, Freed From Death Row, Dies at 51

Published: December 9, 2004

Ronald Keith Williamson, who left his small town in Oklahoma as a high school baseball star with hopes of a Major League career but was later sent to death row and came within five days of execution for a murder he did not commit, died on Saturday at a nursing home near Tulsa. He was 51.

The cause was cirrhosis of the liver, which he learned he had six weeks ago, his sister Annette Hudson said. Mr. Williamson's early life appeared charmed. As a pitcher and catcher in Ada, he twice led his high school teams to the championship of a state where another native son, Mickey Mantle, enjoyed the status of near deity. The Oakland Athletics picked Mr. Williamson in the second round of the 1971 amateur draft. After six years in the minor leagues, Mr. Williamson saw his career end because of arm injuries.

He returned to Oklahoma and worked at a sales job, but began to show signs of a mental illness that was eventually diagnosed as bipolar disorder. His

marriage, to a former Miss Ada, broke up. He returned to his mother's home and slept 20 hours a day on the couch, Ms. Hudson said, afraid of his old bedroom.

In late 1982, a waitress, Debbie Sue Carter, 21, was found raped and killed in her apartment in Ada. The case remained open until 1987, when a woman who had been arrested for passing bad checks told the police that she had heard another prisoner discussing the killing. The man, she said, was Mr. Williamson, who had been in the jail for kiting checks.

Mr. Williamson was charged with the killing. So was a second man, Dennis Fritz, a high school science teacher who had been one of Mr. Williamson's few friends when he returned to town after his baseball career.

The evidence, the authorities said, consisted of 17 hairs that matched those of Mr. Williamson and Mr. Fritz, and the account provided by the woman who said she had heard Mr. Williamson confess.

A second jailhouse informer later stepped forward to buttress the case against Mr. Fritz. Mr. Williamson and Mr.

Fritz were tried separately and found guilty. Mr. Fritz was sentenced to life in prison, and Mr. Williamson - who had not received his psychiatric medicines for months before the trial and shouted angrily at the prosecution witnesses - was sentenced to die. Mr. Williamson later said the prison guards taunted him over an intercom about Ms. Carter's murder.

In September 1994, when all of his state appeals had been exhausted, he was taken to the warden's office and told that he would be executed on Sept. 24. He recalled filling out a form that directed his body to be returned to his sister

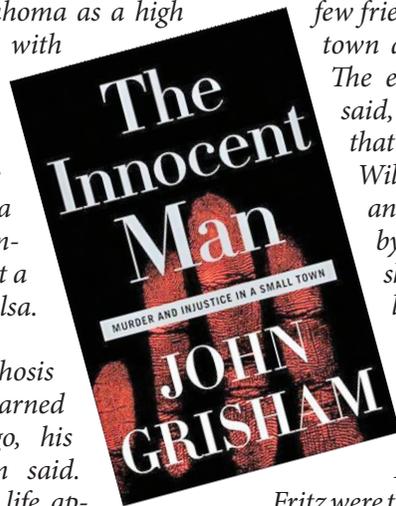
for burial. A team of appellate lawyers, however, sought a writ of habeas corpus from Judge Frank H. Seay of Federal District Court, arguing that Mr. Williamson had not been competent to stand trial and that his lawyer had not effectively challenged the hair evidence or sought other suspects.

Judge Seay granted a stay five days before Mr. Williamson was scheduled to die. In 1998, lawyers from the Innocence Project at the Benjamin C. Cardozo School of Law in New York arranged DNA tests for Mr. Williamson and Mr. Fritz. They showed that neither man had been the source of the semen or hair collected from the victim's body. Another man, Glen D. Gore, has since been convicted of the killing and sentenced to die for it. Mr. Williamson and Mr. Fritz were freed in April 1999. On a visit that spring to New York, they took a tour of Yankee Stadium, and Mr. Williamson wandered along the sparkling outfield grass. "I just got a taste of how much fun they were having up here," he said.

Besides Ms. Hudson, another sister, Renee Simmons of Allen, Tex., survives. The two men later won settlements for their convictions. But Mr. Williamson continued to be troubled by his psychiatric problems, Ms. Hudson said. Last year, however, he participated in a one-mile march, making an appeal to the governor of Illinois to commute the sentences of death row prisoners in that state.

That obituary led Grisham to learn more and more about Williamson and Fritz's case, and eventually he decided to write the book.

Grisham recounted how Williamson had suffered on death row: struggling with mental illness and being given improper medication, pulling his own hair out as well as his teeth. He mentioned how the guards had tortured him as well, speaking to him through an intercom, pretending to be the victim and how he would pay for





the crime. Further, the author stated that Williamson, who died from cirrhosis of the liver, which went untreated in prison.

He then spoke a little bit about the death penalty, and how it poses the danger of executing innocent people, and why that was a reason to do away with it. He said that one day DNA testing would prove that an innocent person had been executed; though he was unsure of the ultimate impact of that on the whole death penalty debate, however he seemed to be saying that that element was probably the best shot at ending the death penalty, and that he would want to write a book on that case if and when it occurred.

Of course, the late Ron Williamson, and his surviving co-defendant Dennis Fritz, who was, in fact, in attendance at the Gala, were not the only people horrifically impacted by their wrongful convictions. I cannot imagine what Renee Simmons and Annette Hudson, Ron Williamson's sisters, went through. Grisham mentioned that when Williamson was within days of being executed, the family was called by the prison and asked what they wanted to do with the body. Both Simmons and Hudson were in attendance.

Christy Sheppard, the sister of Debra Sue Carter, the murder victim that Williamson and Fritz were wrongfully convicted for killing, also had her life changed forever. She was only eight years old when the crime happened, and she grew up believing that Williamson and Fritz were guilty. Grisham mentioned that it had shattered their family. Carter's family believed they could finally move forward knowing that the perpetrators were brought to justice.

Trying to triumph over the tragedy, Sheppard became part of a growing and critical component of the innocence movement: crime victims and their families who want to address and prevent wrongful convictions. Working with the Innocence Project and local advocates for the past two years, Sheppard has campaigned for an Oklahoma innocence commission, an independent entity with members from all areas of the criminal justice system that investigates previous wrongful convictions and suggests reforms to prevent them. Sheppard has talked with legislators and the public about wrongful convictions

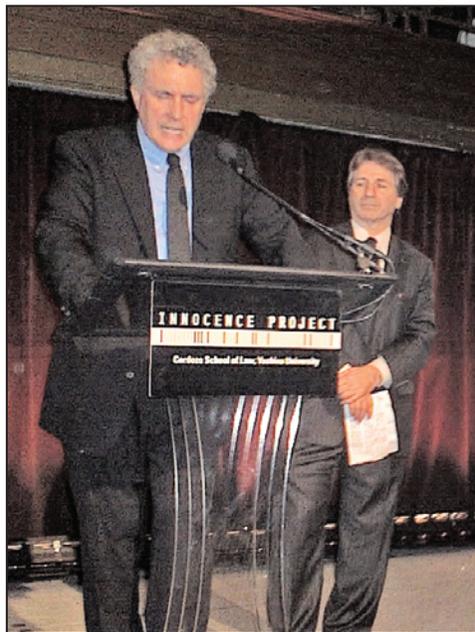
and the need for a state commission. "When I learned about this innocence commission, all the stars aligned, and I knew that's what needed to be done," Sheppard said. When Curtis McCarty of Oklahoma was exonerated in May, Sheppard's family joined McCarty's parents and others at a press conference to renew the call for an innocence commission.

The gala dinner was a very emotional experience for me. As I watched each exonerate mention their name along with the amount of time that they served, I understood, as no one, other than an exonerate, could, the suffering that wrongful incarceration wreaks on a person. I realized that in some ways each person's traumatic time in prison was different, and that the particular horrors may differ, along with the types of mistreatment. Yet there are a lot of similarities that are true across the spectrum, and certainly the experience of being wrongfully imprisoned puts people in a much better vantage point from which to understand the havoc that it wreaks.

With each mention of a name, along with the amount of time served, thoughts raced through my mind of just what that incarceration and all of its effects entailed. Then, I tried to imagine going through it with that length of time. I kept in mind as well that many had experiences worse than mine. Some had been on death row, while others were housed in prisons in other states that were much worse than the horrible ones in New York.

I heard the names of Alan Newton, who served

21 years in New York for rape; Barry Gibbs, who served 19 years for murder in New York; Scott Fappiano, who served 21 years in New York for rape, sodomy, burglary, and sexual abuse;



Peter Neufeld (l) and Barry Scheck, founders of The Innocence Project

Roy Brown, who served 15 years for murder in New York; David Sheppard, who served 9 ½ years in New Jersey for rape, robbery, weapons violations, and terrorist threats; Chris Conover, who served 18 years in North Carolina; Kennedy Brewer, who had been sentenced to death and served 15 years in Mississippi; Dennis Fritz, who served 12 years for murder in Oklahoma;

Jerry Miller, who served 24 ½ years in Illinois for kidnapping, rape, and robbery; James Tillman, who served 16 ½ years for sexual assault, kidnapping, robbery, assault, and larceny in Connecticut; Calvin Johnson, who served 15 ½ years for rape, aggravated sodomy, and burglary in Georgia.

The sight of Fritz on stage, with Williamson's sisters, along with Sheppard, all in solidarity, was so powerful that I teared up a bit.

When it was my turn to speak, I quickly mentioned that from 17-years-of age, I served 16 years in New York for a murder and rape which DNA cleared me of. I also mentioned obtaining my B.A. in Behavioral Science, and of my dream of becoming an attorney and working to exonerate others who have been wrongfully convicted. The exonerates had all been allotted 30 seconds

in which to speak, yet I felt that this was an opportunity to try to bring awareness to a problem that is very often overlooked amidst all of the justifiable attention paid to wrongful convictions and exonerations: the financial difficulties in being able to reintegrate.

Much as I had done in prior interviews with the media, I decided to sacrifice personal privacy by using myself as an example of a problem, in order to call attention to it, with the hope that there would be changes, or at the very least that I would get the conversation started. I mentioned that The Innocence Project has a program by which they collect donations, and spend them on the exonerates on an emergency basis. These funds had been paying the costs of my phone, mental health services, my car insurance, as well as my internet connection, but that these funds would be cut off in a few months, due to my reaching the cap of what they will allocate to each wrongfully convicted person. Despite making money by speaking and writing articles, I would be unable to absorb these additional costs, yet I would need these services just as much as before. Elaborating further, I mentioned that when I had tried to get consistent work in addition to these, not having the work experience, I have been unable to compete with others my age group, due to what happened to me, and thus financial offers have been dead end jobs paying next to nothing.

I also referenced other exonerates who would be facing similar issues. Many came up to me afterwards and said that they had been moved. Whether or not that translates into donors making more contributions to the emergency fund or not, remains to be seen. But despite feeling inadequate and somewhat embarrassed at not being able to thus far be on an even par with others my age who had never been wrongfully convicted, I felt that I had to at least try. ■

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