



Jeff Deskovic

Wrongful Imprisonment And The Challenge Of Social Reintegration

I met Fernando Bermudez while we were both wrongfully incarcerated. As Guardian readers know, Bermudez was exonerated after serving eighteen years for a wrongful murder conviction secured by perjured testimony from the prosecution's star witness. He has been free for four months.

Bermudez recently spoke to students at Ardsley High School, participated in a panel discussion on wrongful convictions sponsored by the state Puerto Rican and Black Legislative Caucus, is working on a book, and hopes to attend Mercy College to complete a Bachelor's degree he began at Hudson Link while in Sing Sing.

But financial obstacles thwarted his plans. He has no car or driver's license and cannot commute from his home in Danbury. Nor could he afford housing in Westchester. After eighteen years inside, Bermudez is having a hard time adjusting to life on the outside. He got married in prison and fathered two kids during conjugal visits. Now freed, suddenly, his family has another mouth to feed, and a man unused to the demands of young children, or able to navigate ordinary activities of daily living unknown to men in prison. Simple things, like modern technology, frustrate him. As previ-

ously reported in this column, he recently got lost, and was overwhelmed with frustration, panic, and disorientation. Sadly, this is



Kian Khattibi

not unusual for victims of long-term wrongful incarceration.

In addition, Bermudez and his family also must contend with the conflicting need to bear witness to his experience, and yet, maintain some modicum of privacy. Media want to know everything: his tenuous financial condition, relationship with his family, and plans for the future. At the moment, his dominant day-to-day feeling is simply disorientation.

Kian Khattibi was misidentified as the perpetrator of a vicious assault in Westchester

and served nine years. In fact, his brother committed the crime. His story was previously featured in The Guardian. He has been



Fernando Bermudez

free for a year and a half.

In that time, he completed an Associate's degree at Westchester Community College, and is currently matriculated at New York University on a substantial, partial scholarship. He is majoring in Media, Culture, and Communication. The balance of his tuition is covered by student loans he can ill afford.

Khattibi knows that ex-cons who lack higher education and/or work experience have dim prospects of finding employment. He wonders how he will be able

to make ends meet to pursue a Masters degree.

The gap in his life repeatedly causes awkward moments with strangers. He shared with The Guardian how people unaware of his story wonder why, as a man in his early thirties, he is only now beginning higher education. He said: "It seems counterproductive or inappropriate to respond to people's surprise or inquiry by stating 'hi, nice to meet you, I was in prison during my whole twenties.'" Such encounters repeatedly provoke deep feelings of frustration and anger at having been wrongfully convicted. But for this injustice, and the vital years lost, his career would be well established by now.

Khattibi did well in prison education courses, and counts his blessings, but wonders "what kind of position other ex-nerees are in who are not so lucky to have a good GPA or schools helping them out?"

Bermudez and Khattibi illustrate the urgent need for remedial legislation to help the wrongfully convicted. All are in need of financial assistance, scholarship funds, housing, mental health services, assistance with technology and worker retraining. Providing such funds is both a moral imperative and a practical necessity.