Exoneree Diaries: The Jarrett Adams interview

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You're a Chicago native, but were wrongfully convicted of sexual assault in Wisconsin. What led to your wrongful conviction?

Let me first say that I was 17 years old African-American kid who had no business traveling from Chicago to Wisconsin with no adult supervision. I traveled to Wisconsin with two friends to attend a party and left with a false accusation of rape.

I can't go on without acknowledging the fact that there was a lot of racial tension that surrounded the accusation. The accuser was white and the accused were three young black men from Chicago. In [the state's] mind, the accusation was good enough to pursue a conviction. We were accused of sneaking up four flights of stairs, committing a sexual assault then fleeing the scene.

My state-appointed attorney failed to investigate and secure witnesses who would have definitely proved this did not happen and the accusation was false.

The only thing that was used against us, believe it or not, in this serious rape case was the words of the accuser. There was no DNA dispute. There was no doctor at the trial. It was as simple as "they raped me."

After serving nearly ten years, you were exonerated with the help of the Wisconsin Innocence Project at the University of Wisconsin Law School. What was it like leaving prison?

Out of body experience. You sit, hope and wish for the day to come and when it finally gets here, you're so exhausted that you really want to just move on. You want closure. However, closure in many of the cases like mine is never reached. The courts ordered my conviction reversed, and the prosecutors filed a motion that dismissed all the charges against me.

That was it. I was offered no assistance with living, medical or financial. I was basically released into a world that had left me 10 years behind. I left with a jogging suit off of canteen (commissary shop) and orange shoes that they provide for you in the jail. I had $30 left on my account.

When they mailed me the check, they charged me $16 for the orange shoes.

My mother and my stepfather were both seniors living on fixed incomes by the time I was released, and they were all I had. I had the fortune of coming home to my mother's couch...
and just started to try to put my life together back on my own. I mean, I really didn’t have a choice.

**What were your early days as an exoneree like?**

Just imagine trying to learn everything that came out in 10 years into one day, two days, three days. That’s what it was. It was me entering a game where I was 10 years behind. It was just catch up. It was a game of catch up. A game of figure it out. A game of walking around a dark room looking for a light switch.

I remember interviewing for a job for Comcast. The interview went very, very well. The lady who interviewed me loved me. She basically sent me over for the physical and everything. I passed the physical. The last thing I was waiting for was the background check.

Although, I had no record, there was a 10-year gap on my resume. Jobs do credit checks now. My last known address was a super-max. They sent me a letter and basically said that they had found someone else for the position, but I pretty much knew what was going on. The news of my conviction and it being overturned was a click of a button away on Google.

I took the anger and frustration and immediately turned to school and never looked back. A person is wrongfully convicted, case dismissed, overturned, going home, and now you’re faced with the hole that was dug as a result of the wrongful conviction. And no matter how far you go, at times, it’s like a bungee cord that snaps you right back.

**In Wisconsin, the compensation statute for exonerees is one of the weakest in the country, offering up to $25,000 to those who can prove that he or she did not bring about his or her own wrongful conviction. How has this affected your life?**

Where in the world is it OK for a person to be injured, have years of their life taken away and then when it’s time to correct the wrong, now they have to prove that they had nothing to do with the wrong? Listen, the standard in Wisconsin is different than anywhere else.

The standard in Wisconsin is proof of absolute innocence. Absolute innocence. You go from proving somebody guilty beyond a reasonable doubt to coming out, and you have to prove yourself absolutely innocent. Absolute innocence is in the eye of the beholder. In a case like mine, if the accuser doesn’t come and say I pointed out the wrong guy or he didn’t do it, I stand the chance to not be compensated at all. This is a ridiculous standard. You ask that a person be found guilty, and he only be found guilty if there is proof beyond reasonable doubt that he did it. T

hat right there says it all because my case being overturned on evidence-based. There was a witness who completely undermined the accusation of this young lady saying we snuck up a flight of stairs and we raped her and we left. There was a witness who was the reason why my case was overturned, so therefore, he is the reasonable doubt and the conviction was obtained wrongfully. All the charges were dismissed. And so now you’re asking me to come back around and prove that I was absolutely innocent?

That was a standard that it didn’t even take for me to be found guilty! How are you asking me to meet a standard that didn’t even have to be met in finding me guilty? Proof beyond a
reasonable doubt. If there was no reasonable doubt in my case I would not be here free to
do this interview today.

How can a person who slips and falls in a courthouse stand to get thousands of dollars, but
if you’re wrongly convicted there stands a chance you get nothing.

What should be done to improve the statute?
Some exonerees are compensated, some aren’t. That's still mind-boggling to me. I don't
understand it. But the one thing that everyone experiences is coming home, and there's a
12 to 18-month period where they have absolutely nothing, and they’re waiting on
compensation or waiting on help.

Until someone comes up with a better idea, I think this is what should be implemented. If
you have a case that's overturned on evidence-based -- meaning that evidence that could
undermine the state's case and corroborate your innocence, was not in front of the jury,
who is the fact-finder, and your case is overturned, then that's not a technicality. Your case
is overturned because there was reasonable doubt, and jurors could not have found you
guilty beyond a reasonable doubt had they had that evidence. That right there should be
the definition of what an exoneree is.

If the prosecution dismisses the charges, you should be compensated. No argument. If the
prosecution retries you again, and because of evidence that you present, you are found not
guilty, you should be compensated.

The judges when they overturn these convictions, they should stipulate in their orders that
the person be restored to their previous status. If you didn’t have a job, you get whatever
the minimum wage was for that year. That's what you get for that year, and you calculate it
like that. If you had a job, whatever you were making that year plus the cost-of-living
increase, that is what you should immediately get upon being release. That check should
be there, period, waiting on you.

There are so many cases where guys go home, and they're sleeping on couches. Or they
go home, and they're sleeping in drug houses. They are family, but the family is selling
drugs, and they're putting themselves in another worse situation. Guys come home, and
they sign contracts with their family members saying, "Hey, I'll give you half of my
compensation if you just let me live here." [The state] is setting us up for failure, and they
just don't care.

What about the cases we hear about where people are compensated millions of dollars?
The reason some people get compensated and some don't? Sometimes you just have
mistakes. You have mistakes by lawyers. Just wrongful convictions. But other times, you
have egregious acts done by the police where they were wrong, and they know they were
wrong. Those are the cases that usually go with civil suits, and they get big lump sums of
money.

But I'm not even talking about that. I'm talking about the hole that is being dug by wrongful
conviction that you have to come out here to. I'm talking about me right now. Everyone is
talking about "Wow, he's in law school. This is great!" But no one really knows that I'm still
paying on debts that were incurred as a result of being locked up and wrongfully convicted.

Up until this last month, this past December, you know I was still paying a public defender bill for the lawyer at my wrongful conviction? They put it on my credit. It kept me from getting a grad-plus loan for law school. I had to negotiate with them and pay it. Why am I paying for a job that a lawyer did when he was negligent in doing it and it led to my wrongful conviction?

After your release, you attended junior college and then enrolled in Roosevelt University, graduating with the highest honors. You work full-time as a federal defense investigator, and you're in your final year of law school at Loyola University. These are huge accomplishments even for someone who hasn't had the setbacks in life you have experienced. What challenges have you faced, and what has kept you going?

It's a challenge every day. The challenges keep me going. Look, I'm not amazing. I can be duplicated. If you give the person the resources, I think there will be a lot of other Jarrett Adams who come out and put their lives back together.

Part of my motivation is for 10 years, my mother and my two aunts came and saw me. They wrote me letters. The wrinkles and creases of anguish on their face is something that is etched in my memory. It drives me. For them to show that type of support, for them to be so loyal, why not go get a law degree and place it in their hands as soon as I walk across the stage? At the time, all they did was cry, were down and sad. But now, by them seeing me strive, they smile ear to ear. Whatever it takes to keep them smiling, that's what I'll do.

[My mother and I] have both been robbed of 10 years of life together. That's my motivation. So much has happened to us. We've been injured, and instead of just sitting and crying and stuff, I keep faith in God, and I just push forward.

Together with Antione Day, whose story is featured in Exoneree Diaries, you've founded an organization called Life After Justice that provides housing and services to exonerés. What's your mission?

Wrongful convictions are real. They happen. They're going to continue to happen and continue to be uncovered.

Life After Justice is not going to ask you to file a petition to get help. Immediately upon you being released, we would like to help you get your life back together and start the healing process. We would like to help you get evaluated mentally. Therapists, dental work, doctors to take a look at you. Let's just say there are not the best dentists and doctors in the prison system.

This organization is to prevent others from going through what we went through. [This is] civil rights: People injured, and people taking a stand and saying that's not right, all in the effort and hopes and dreams and wishes that it never happens to other people. That's exactly what we're doing.

Both Antione and I, we came home the same way. He stood out in the rain trying to figure
out a way to get home, and he lived in his mother’s basement until he could find a way to get his life together. I stayed on my mother’s couch, trying to figure it out.

Life After Justice is not a halfway house. It’s not a landing spot. It’s a launching pad to help people put their lives back together after being wrongfully convicted. This is the kind of place that will teach you how to balance a checkbook, all the way to how to tie a Windsor knot for your job interview.