

“After Innocence” Life After Release For The Wrongfully Imprisoned

Documentary. Directed by Jessica Sanders. Produced and written by Jessica Sanders and Marc Simon. 95 minutes. Not rated; for mature audiences.

Review by Moira Macdonald

“I remember, when I first got out of prison, how loud the world was,” says Nick Yarris softly. He’s one of a number of wrongfully imprisoned men profiled in Jessica Sanders’ powerful Academy Award-nominated documentary “After Innocence.”

Yarris was released after 23 years in solitary confinement for a crime he didn’t commit. The film shows him visiting his childhood neighborhood, looking pale and dazed after years confined in darkness. “I’m a ghost in my own life,” he says.

Yarris became the 140th person in the United States to be exonerated by post-conviction DNA testing and the 13th DNA exoneration from death row. Many of these cases were

handled by The Innocence Project, a non-profit legal clinic dedicated to criminal-justice reform and freeing the innocent. In the film, we see law students processing the many letters from inmates received by the office — file drawers are stuffed full of desperate letters not yet read, like muffled cries for help.

Sanders’ film, a series of profiles interspersed by the throughline of one man’s ongoing case, feels more like a great subject than great filmmaking. Mostly she just lets the exonerees tell their stories, and mostly that’s more than enough. (One sequence, as a man is released from prison and into the arms of his family as Sanders’ camera watches, feels a bit invasive: You wonder how this scene might have played itself out without cameras.)

But “After Innocence” is ultimately informative (we learn, for example, that exonerees are generally given no follow-up assistance upon release, as parolees are) and deeply moving. The sister of Vincent Moto, who spent 10-1/2 years wrongfully imprisoned, explains how her brother has changed: “What’s different is, he knows fair doesn’t exist.”

Dennis Maher, imprisoned 19 years, moves back in with his parents upon his release,

sleeping on a foldout couch in what used to be his parents’ TV room. At his modest birthday party, his extended family sings “Happy Birthday” in that pleasantly off-key way that families do, and he’s quiet, perhaps remembering how many birthdays passed without song.

And a friendship briefly profiled near the end is so unlikely, it gives hope for a better world. Jennifer Thompson-Canino was raped as a college student, and through her ordeal forced herself to remember every detail of her assailant’s face. But her memory was imperfect: On her identification, Ronald Cotton received a life sentence, but years later another man confessed to the crime. DNA testing confirmed that Cotton, who had served 11 years, was innocent.

Now Thompson-Canino and Cotton are friends, often publicly speaking together about the problems of eyewitness identification. In the film, they are at ease together, and Cotton’s simple words about his new life resonate: “Live, forgive and keep moving on.”

Moira Macdonald is *The Seattle Times*’ movie critic.

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LaFonso Rollins Awarded \$9 Million For Wrongful Rape Conviction

By JD Staff

After his 1993 arrest for the rape of an elderly Chicago woman, 16-year-old LaFonso Rollins confessed in writing to the attack. He immediately recanted, claiming he had “confessed” because it was the only way to stop being struck and threatened by the Chicago police detectives questioning him.

The jury in LaFonso’s 1994 trial rejected his claim of innocence. Instead they convicted him by relying on his confession and the witnesses who picked him out of a lineup. He was sentenced to 75 years in prison.

Although the Chicago PD had collected the assailant’s semen found on a pillowcase in the woman’s apartment, the Chicago crime lab did not do a DNA comparison of that evidence with LaFonso’s blood and saliva that detectives had obtained.

After years of effort by LaFonso and his supporters, in 2004 a DNA test was finally conducted on the assailant’s semen and LaFonso’s blood and saliva. He was excluded, and subse-

quently released in July 2004 – 4,193 days – 11-1/2 years – after being wrongly imprisoned.

Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich pardoned Rollins in January 2005.

Rollins filed a \$10 million civil lawsuit in state court against the City of Chicago. The suit alleged that Rollins falsely confessed to the rape because city police detectives used “excessive force, intimidation, threats and misrepresentations.”¹

In January 2006, Chicago and Rollins agreed to settle the suit for \$9 million – only \$1 million less than he was seeking.

A city attorney said in response to being asked why the city agreed to quickly settle the suit for such a large amount, “We hope the expeditious resolution of this case, as well as the substantial settlement, will serve as a demonstration of our good faith in this matter.”²

That was lawyerese masking the real reason for Chicago’s eagerness to settle the case: documents provided city attorneys during their preparations to defend against Rollins lawsuit indicated there was a problem with the way the Chicago crime lab handled the evidence in his case. That information indicated a crime lab analyst may not have disclosed test results that excluded Rollins. Chicago’s law-

yers interpreted the information to mean that if the case went to trial, a jury might decide to award Rollins much more than \$10 million. So they cut their losses.

Chicago PD Superintendent Philip Cline announced after the settlement that he wanted an internal investigation conducted into how the five detectives involved in Rollins’ case obtained his written confession, when he was in fact innocent.

A special state prosecutor has been investigating allegations that Chicago police officers have tortured numerous suspects into making false confessions. Although one of the Chicago PD officers being investigated in that probe denies torturing anyone in his custody, he was in fact fired for his gross mistreatment of a suspect.

Rollins, now 30, said after the settlement was announced, “What people got to keep in mind is that this is not a lottery ticket. I had to fight physically and mentally ... to try to hold onto my dignity and pride.”³

Endnotes and sources:

1 Wrongfully convicted man get \$9 million, Gary Washburn, *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 2006.

2 *Id.*

3 City reaches settlement in conviction suit, Megan Reichgott (AP), *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 27, 2006.

