ANNUAL REPORT
2018

VISION
OF JUSTICE

MIDWEST INNOCENCE PROJECT
Since our inception, we at the Midwest Innocence Project have been consumed with one thing: A vision of justice. That vision, of course, includes fighting for the release of innocent people from prison. But our vision extends past prison walls, too: Giving those released the tools to rebuild a life after incarceration; building a justice system that only convicts the guilty; and spreading awareness of the challenges we fight against.

A vision, at first, starts as an idea—something rooted in our collective imagination.

But thanks to the work this year of our staff, volunteers, donors, and supporters, we’re transforming a shared vision into reality. Fearless optimism has become a little more concrete. Hope has turned into progress. An imagined vision of justice is transforming into something we can see—something we can experience.

The progress this year has been unprecedented. Rodney Lincoln, Laquanda “Faye” Jacobs, and John Brown have all been released from prison in 2018, after decades lost. Kansas passed one of the strongest compensation laws in the nation, the likes of which MIP has been working towards for years. Our “Faces of Innocence” gala raised more than it has in the history of our organization, funding that is critical to push the mission forward.

It takes a nearly endless flow of kinetic energy to help our vision of justice be realized. A vision doesn’t become reality without work. And this year, this labor towards justice has extended to thousands of people within our five-state area. MIP staff, volunteers, and pro bono lawyers donated thousands of hours, and with you and state legislators, worked together to reframe the system.

We see your contributions, your time, your commitment—and we are seeing results.

Yet even in the face of our successes in 2018, much work remains to be done. Although Kansas passed a compensation law, other states have failed to do the same. MIP clients still sit behind bars, and hundreds of others wait for their cases to be investigated and litigated.

Indeed, even some of our biggest successes have come with state-mandated asterisks; Both Faye Jacobs and Rodney Lincoln had their sentences commuted, rather than receiving full exonerations. Both are still considered felons in the eyes of the law, and move forward in their new lives with that cloud above them.

But we can change that.

We have seen the power of our shared vision when we work towards it together. With your help, we can continue to bend the arc of history. With your help, we can make our vision of justice not just a vision, but a reality.

Tricia Bushnell, Executive Director
For years, Rodney Lincoln’s birthday treat was the same gloomy substitute for cake: A cinnamon roll from a prison vending machine. Into the icing would go Cheetos, and Lincoln pretended to blow out his makeshift candles. He envisioned the day he would be able to celebrate a birthday outside of those prison walls.

This summer, that day finally came. Lincoln, who served more than 36 years in prison for a murder and assault he did not commit, had his sentence commuted by outgoing Missouri Governor Eric Greitens.

Lincoln had been convicted based off the eyewitness testimony of a young victim pressured by the prosecution, as well as forensic evidence that was discredited years later after DNA testing.

The eyewitness who had originally testified eventually wrote a letter to then-Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, asking for clemency for Mr. Lincoln. Two years later, Greitens finally listened, setting Lincoln free after more than three decades.

And at last, Lincoln got a real birthday cake—big enough to share, chocolate, white icing. Printed on top was a picture of himself and his four children. And instead of a stale Cheeto “candle,” a miniature fishing pole poked through the frosting.

Most importantly, in place of prison guards, Lincoln’s family and friends surrounded him. At last, he was home.

But a birthday cake isn’t the only symbol of Lincoln’s newfound freedom. He’s been parasailing and tubing. He’s clambered onto a jet ski and planned a skydiving trip with his son.

“I made a great discovery,” Lincoln said. “It’s a lot more fun living life than just doing life.”

Still, Lincoln is envisioning more.

In addition to his daredevil bucket list, Lincoln has added speaking engagements to his post-prison agenda. He wants to share his story and drum up support for his vision: A world without innocent people behind bars.

“My goal is to help those I left behind me when I walked out of that prison,” Lincoln said. “There are people in the same situation I was in. I got so much help, and I can never in my life pay it all back. But I have an obligation to pay it forward.”
Justice, in its truest form, is not just about innocent people being freed from prison walls. Justice also involves giving them the resources to build a life once they get home.

Thanks to constant pushing from citizens, lobbying work from the MIP, and eventually some bipartisan cooperation, Kansas became the latest state to make a commitment to that broader vision of justice. This year, the state passed one of the strongest compensation laws in the country. Although nothing can truly make up for the decades lost to wrongful incarceration, compensation from the state is a start. The bill will hopefully provide exonerees—like MIP clients Lamonte McIntyre, Richard Jones, and Floyd Bledsoe—with $65,000 per year of wrongful imprisonment and $25,000 for each year wrongfully on parole. But the pieces of a new life are not made solely of money. What sets the Kansas law apart from many others in the U.S. is its non-monetary benefits: financial literacy training, housing and tuition assistance, health care, and counseling.

The law will be a foundation for exonerees to rebuild their lives—a task often made impossible by the years lost during incarceration. Work, of course, remains to be done. Not all compensation bills are equal, and some states don’t even have them. That means that some MIP clients will receive no assistance from their respective states, even after being freed from prison. Rodney Lincoln, whose sentence was commuted in Missouri, and who was not officially exonerated, will not have access to the benefits of his state’s compensation law. Meanwhile, Laquanda “Faye” Jacobs was released in Arkansas, where no compensation law exists.

Our vision of justice is to take away this unequal footing. We’ve seen success this year. But the fight to give all innocent people equal access to a full life outside prison walls continues.
Faye Jacobs just wanted color back in her life.

She wanted a splash of color in her hair, after years of not being able to go to a salon. She wanted clothes in bright, loud hues—lime green, red, flowered patterns. After a lifetime spent behind bars, Jacobs wanted to escape not only the memories of a wrongful incarceration, but the hues of boring, lifeless grey that had surrounded her in a prison cell.

Jacobs went to prison when she was 16 years old. Thanks to a faulty eyewitness identification, Jacobs was convicted of capital murder—a murder she did not commit. The teenager became the first female juvenile in Arkansas history to be sentenced to life in prison without parole.

At 42, Jacobs finally walked free, after a team of attorneys led by the Midwest Innocence Project and Kansas City-based law firm Lathrop Gage got involved with her case. Jacobs was resentenced to “time served” and released in July. Since then, Jacobs has been able to fix her hair, wear jewelry and buy colorful clothes—all the normal pieces of an adult woman’s life that had been ripped away from her as a teenager.

The case also served as a reminder to Lathrop Gage partner Matthew Jacober of why he and his colleagues got into law in the first place: “We realized we weren’t doing all we could in relation to pro bono cases,” Jacober said. “We purposefully started to look for opportunities for our lawyers. From a leadership perspective, if we’re going to say pro bono is important, then we need to actually make it important. … I love this kind of stuff. I like making sure that the government is taken to task.”

Since Jacobs was resentenced rather than officially exonerated, the murder conviction remains on her permanent record.

There’s still work to be done to give Jacobs full access to a new life. But her optimism hasn’t been colored by the decades of darkness she’s persevered.

“Faye has every right to be a bitter, angry, tortured person,” Jacober said. “But [when she was resentenced], she had the biggest smile I’ve seen in a long time. Her eyes lit up. It’s incredible to see a person who has every right to a broken spirit keep her faith in herself and still stay optimistic.”
TIPPING THE SCALES

1 EXONERATED*
1 COMPENSATION BILL PASSED
3 RELEASED
103 QUESTIONNAIRES PROCESSED
40 CASES BEING SCREENED BY VOLUNTEERS
52 INVESTIGATIONS PENDING
4 DEATH PENALTY CASE CONSULTS
21 CASES AT PARTNERS
12 CASES IN ACTIVE LITIGATION

908 CASES
60 CASES
52 CASES
141 CASES
469 CASES
83 CASES
22 CASES
26 CASES
15 CASES
46 COUNTIES
22 COUNTIES
26 COUNTIES
15 COUNTIES
83 COUNTIES
22 COUNTIES
26 COUNTIES
15 COUNTIES
46 COUNTIES

96% MALE
4% FEMALE
1% ASIAN
1% NATIVE AMERICAN
3% HISPANIC
53% BLACK
42% WHITE

RAISING AWARENESS

9,698 FOLLOWERS
4,746 shares
59,139 views

5,190 FOLLOWERS
4,393 NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS

*Lamonte McIntyre was released in October of 2017
For an all-encompassing vision of justice to be realized, the light must come from all directions. But sometimes, that vision is stimulated by sound instead.

The Midwest Innocence Project fights against issues that are often insidious. Hidden from view behind prison bars or closed courtroom doors, the plight of the wrongfully incarcerated isn’t something obvious to the naked or uninformed eye.

It isn’t just money that will solve the issues taken on by the MIP. What’s crucial is helping others understand these issues.

That’s been the goal of the MIP’s “Next Generation” Board since its inception in 2016 by local attorney Matthew Merryman. The Board draws from a younger demographic (40 years and under). Its primary goal isn’t to run the organization or fundraise—it’s to spread awareness, especially among a demographic known for its social consciousness more so than its riches.

“We’re reaching younger people who aren’t connected to traditional means of fundraising,” said Tim Dixon, a Next Gen Board member. “At the end of the day, any one of us could experience wrongful incarceration. The MIP opened my eyes to the fact that the problem exists.”

The Board—led by President Kathleen Irish, a local immigration attorney—is comprised of around 30 members, drawing about equally from the legal community and other citizens. It’s responsible for the MIP’s “Champions of Justice” event each year, which features a friendly fundraising competition among teams, eventually leading up to an October concert to raise awareness.

Getting in front of the community has been the primary goal of the Next Gen Board. Its vision of justice starts with the foundation of awareness.

“I went to law school not to make a million dollars,” Irish said. “I wanted to be involved in the legal community where I felt like I could be a good advocate. We just hope that in the next generation, we don’t have problems like these.”
John Brown's granddaughter, Amorra, is nearly as tall as him now. She's 9 years old, growing like a weed, and finally able to spend time with her grandfather outside of a prison.

For 26 years, Brown has been behind bars for a crime he did not commit. He was convicted of a robbery and murder in Arkansas based on a coerced confession from his co-defendant—despite DNA evidence excluding Brown from the crime.

The MIP stepped in and worked to make those in power see that not only was the evidence against Brown flimsy and circumstantial, it had been manufactured.

Finally, after decades of waiting, Brown walked free in September. Judge Billy Roy Wilson overturned Brown's conviction, ordering he be released or retried within 30 days.

Now, Brown is in Las Vegas with his family, staying focused on his new life. He has a new job, and gets to play basketball with Amorra in his spare time. That time together is what feeds Brown's spirit—a spirit that didn't break, despite 26 years behind bars.

“I had a good support system,” Brown said. “My lawyers were my dream team. I couldn’t have done any better than them. They had my best interests at heart, and they showed me a lot of love. It was surreal—because there was someone to fight for me.”
I wanna smile and find reasons to celebrate
This pious day, a moment in the present
I remember the journey of the days & years:
Some with oversized joy, others filled with tears. Some
Filled with courage, others filled with fears.
An unspeakable experience and reflective story of triumph.
I have been betrayed, yet I’ve never strayed
Reporting to duty daily, excavating the soul’s core essence,
Discovery of a real man, scattered bones of an adolescent.
Managing to topple obstacles on my path of progression,
Reaching for a moment of silence, counting every blessing,
Thankful for every lesson,
Casualties all around me, finding ways to keep it stepping.
Miracles in the making:
Some very clear, some in a disguise.
Knowing in God’s time, I most certainly will arrive.
Yes, I will arrive.

—Ricky Kidd
Vital to MIP’s successes this year is the strength of our connections. It takes a team to realize our vision of justice and our team is stronger than ever. No connection is stronger than our partnership with the Nebraska Innocence Project. Our network and support system is expanding and growing. It’s a game-changer for Nebraska, as well as the region as a whole. We’re excited to take that next step.

We call on all stakeholders and partners to join us in the fight for justice. Our work is not easy, but it is rewarding. The support we receive from our donors, partners, and volunteers is vital to our success. We are grateful for the contributions of our donors, especially those who have pledged to support us financially. We are committed to providing justice for those who have been wrongfully convicted and to empowering our community with knowledge and resources to prevent future injustices.

We invite you to join us in our mission to fight for justice for the innocent. Your support is vital to our success. Together, we can make a difference. Let’s continue to work towards a world where justice is a reality for all.

We challenge all of our partners, donors, and volunteers to pledge to support us financially in making a difference in our communities. Let’s work together to ensure that justice is a reality for all.

We appreciate your support and look forward to working with you in the future. Let’s build a better world together.

VITAL-MIP-Support.png

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