

When Innocence Isn't Enough - The Rodney Lincoln Story

When I ask Rodney Lincoln what he hopes people learn from his story, he answers in just three words:

Learn to appreciate.

It's not the answer we might expect from someone with a story like Rodney's. After spending 36 years of his life wrongfully incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit, it would be easy to assume that anger, not gratitude, would be the driving force in his life.

But though Rodney's story is a crash course in the flaws, oversights, and rampant injustices that plague the criminal legal system, it's also a story of hope. A story of resilience and dedication and family and community. A story about what we can accomplish together, and the work we have yet to do.

It's an incredible story. And one you should read in his own words.

Rodney:

Well. I guess I could start at the beginning.

On May the 23rd, 1982, I was at my mother's house in St. Louis.. I had my two daughters with me. I'd gone to the store for a few minutes, and while I was out, my mother got a phone call from the police department that they would like to speak to me.

When I got back, I called them. We talked for a while, and they asked if they could come out and talk to me in person. I said, "Fine." They came out, we spoke for a few minutes, and they asked me if I could go into the station with them to discuss it some more.

And again, like a fool, I said "Fine."

Once we got to the station, they put me in a cell for a few hours. Then they came and got me out of the cell and took me to a line up. After the line up, they cuffed me, put me back in the cell, and informed me that I was being arrested.

For capital murder.

MIP: You'd been identified in the line up by a 7-year-old witness, who claimed it was you she'd seen committing a violent crime. And you must have been terrified.

To say the least. After that, I was questioned several times. I denied having any involvement with the crime. They eventually put me in jail, and I spent from May of 1982 till November of 1983 in jail.

During that time, I went through two trials. The first trial came up as a hung jury - they couldn't decide one way or the other.

At the second trial, in November 1983, the jury convicted me of manslaughter in place of capital murder, and found me guilty of two counts of first degree assault.

After that, I went to prison.

While in prison, I filed a motion for retrial, and it was denied. I didn't have any way of fighting it. My brother had hired an attorney who turned out to be a crook. I couldn't afford another one.

I gave up. And I thought that way until 2005.

In 2005, my daughter was able to get Midwest Innocence Project interested in my case. During this time, she also organized a support group for me that grew to hundreds.

In 2010, after years of asking, we finally succeeded in having the evidence from the scene DNA tested. The only physical evidence was a single hair.

The DNA test found the hair was not mine.

No surprise to you.

No surprise to me. But when we had a hearing to release me, the court said that the eyewitness testimony of the victim was more important than the physical evidence that was presented.

Now remember - at the time that the victim testified against me, she was a 7-year-old traumatized young girl who had just gone through a horrific experience. But that's what they decided to do.

And three more years passed.

Around 2013, Crime Watch Daily did a series of shows on my case. After watching one of the shows, the victim - that same 7-year-old girl, now an adult - contacted my daughter and told her that she had made a mistake 30 years ago. She came to St. Louis to the district attorney's office, the city prosecutor, and told them that she had made a mistake, and that she wanted me released immediately.

But the city prosecutor's office determined she was not credible.

Now, this woman was in the military. She worked at the Pentagon. She had the highest top-secret security clearance that you can get. As a traumatized, 7-year-old girl, they decided she was credible. But now, as an adult, they decided she was not.

My team didn't give up. We had several hearings. One of the answers to my petition for release on innocence was "Although you have shown evidence of innocence, we cannot release you, because you do not have the death sentence."

So in Missouri, innocence is only enough for release if you have a death sentence?

That is correct. And at the time, I was quite angry.

But we still didn't give up. After everything, we were preparing another habeas corpus, getting ready to go to court with it. But on June 1st, 2018, one of the prison guards told me to go back to my cell, put on my grays, and get my ID card.

I figured I had gotten a write up for something, so I asked them "Can you tell me what I did?" They said "I told you to go back to your cell, put on your grays, and get your ID card."

"Yes sir."

So I went back to my cell, changed. They let me out of the wing to wait, and I asked again "Serg, can you tell me what I've done?"

He looked at me in kind of a smirky way and said "You have a phone call coming from the governor."

I said "Man, what did I do to him?"

And he smirked again and said "No, seriously, you have a phone call coming from the governor. You have to come with me."

Even at that point, I still had no idea what was going on.

We got up front and they sat me down in the library with a bunch of officers and COs, and they told me to wait. A few moments later, they brought another man in and sat him down next to me. And they told us "You will be getting a call from the governor sometime between 11 and 1 o'clock."

And we said "Ok! We'll sit and wait for the governor."

It was about quarter to 11 then. 11 o'clock comes around and guess what? No phone call.

12 o'clock, 1 o'clock, 3 o'clock, no phone call.

A little after 3, one of the officers in the room with us motioned to me to come over to him. He hands me a cell phone.

I looked at him, and I looked at the cell phone, and I looked at him. I'd seen cell phones on TV, but I'd never had one in my hand.

He showed me what to do, and I heard my attorney say "Rodney, we're on our way up there now."

I said "Why are you coming?"

She said "We want to make sure there's no delay in processing you out."

Well normally, processing out is a two-day event. I said "You might have heard wrong, I'm not leaving today." And she said "Well, we're coming up anyway. Oh, and your daughter's on the way."

About 3:45, the phone rang in the office. The manager answered it and motioned for the other guy to come in.

After a few moments, he comes out of the office and he says "I'm going home." And we gave each other a hug.

They told me to go into the office and sit down. I sat there about 3-4 minutes, and the phone rang. The manager answers it, and he hands it to me.

A voice says "Is this Rodney Lincoln?"

"Yes it is"

"I have someone who wants to speak with you. Here is the governor of the state of Missouri."

The governor comes on the phone and says "Rodney? I just wanted to call and let you know that I'm commuting your sentence to time served, and you will be able to go home, sir."

I guess I was still in shock, because the only thing I could say was "Thank you."

He said "Rodney, I want you to go out and be a better citizen. Make this a better community. Make this a better state. And God bless you."

At 6:20 that evening, I walked out the front door.

Over 30 years of fighting to be free, and then with less than a day of notice you're suddenly outside. How did it feel walking out that door?

I was in a state of shock. I was overjoyed, naturally. But I still didn't realize the fact that I was free.

Thank God I have a family. That's what helped me the most.

The world was very different. I was amazed, and intrigued, and most of the time I was frustrated. I could see what a wonderful thing technology could be if you knew how to use it, but I didn't know how to use it. I was used to making phone calls by sticking my finger in a dial and turning it. Now I got a phone that's a lot smarter than I am.

It was like my mind was still in the 1980s, but my body was in the 2020s.

Can you tell me a little bit about what life is like now? How are you doing?

I am doing fantastic. Right after I came home, we took a vacation down to Alabama. I went deep sea fishing, I went paragliding, rode on a pirate ship, swam in the ocean. I enjoyed a bunch of my family, grandkids, and great grandkids around me.

Since we got back, I've been busy doing things I would never have done before. In September of 2018, my youngest son and I jumped out of a perfectly good airplane. And it was wonderful. I've got a trip planned for June 1st, 2025 - me and my first born grandchild are going to skydive together.

One of the law students that worked on my case invited me out to their place for a week, so I went to Colorado. I went to the top of Pikes Peak. I ziplined the gorge - that was nice! I got within arms length of a fully grown moose.

Those are huge!

Very, very much so. His shoulders were about a foot and a half above my head. That was amazing.

I've also been traveling around advocating for the wrongfully convicted. I've been to Kansas City, Omaha, Chicago. I was there to welcome another man who was released. I've been trying to pay back a little bit of what was given to me.

There have been so many people who helped me along the way. All my supporters, my family. Midwest Innocence Project has stood beside me all the way, and they're still fighting for me. We're still trying to get my exoneration.

It's really something when you realize how many people are affected by one wrongful conviction. It takes an army to get it corrected.

If they even can.

Missouri is the only state where a defendant cannot use their innocence to get out of prison unless they are sentenced to death.

We're working hard to change that for other innocent people, like Rodney, who deserve a chance to live freely, with their families, in their homes.

Help us make sure innocence is a legal claim available for every person in Missouri who has been wrongfully convicted. [Learn how.](#)