

**Exonerees like Ken Nixon are creating hope for the thousands of innocent people still incarcerated - and you can help, too.**

Hope isn't always easy to hold onto.

In a system where change takes time, proof can be expensive and difficult to uncover, and innocence isn't always enough. Those who have been wrongfully incarcerated often spend years trying to hold on to hope that justice will eventually be served.

Midwest Innocence Project Board Member Ken Nixon spent over 15 years struggling to hold onto hope while incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. Since his exoneration, he's devoted his life to making sure those who are still waiting know they aren't alone.

Ken's story of wrongful incarceration is one of thousands. We asked Ken to share his story with us as an example of what the support of organizations like the Midwest Innocence Project (MIP) can accomplish, and a reminder of how essential that support is for our innocent neighbors, family members, and friends who are waiting for the justice they deserve.

**Ken:**

I spent 15 years and nine months incarcerated in the Michigan Department of Corrections for a crime that I did not commit.

I entered the prison system in 2005. I was exonerated in 2021.

A short time after coming home - and I mean a short time, like a few months later - I was approached by a group of exonerees that had already been meeting in an unofficial capacity. They voted me in as the leader, and from there we became The Organization of Exonerees.

We immediately started advocating for justice system change on all fronts, heavily leaning into policy and legislative reform, reentry struggles, and bringing awareness to wrongful convictions as much as we possibly could. Eventually, I was connected to MIP by way of the Lamar Johnson and Kevin Strickland cases. After seeing a press conference about the cases, I made contact with MIP's Executive Director, Tricia, and asked how we could be helpful. She told me a court date was coming up for Lamar, so the Vice President of our organization, Marvin Cotton, and I jumped in the car and drove 12 hours to attend Lamar's hearing. And that's how I was introduced to MIP.

**So after 15 years inside, you have your freedom restored. Then just a few months later, you're out and already involved in advocacy work. How did that feel?**

I spent 15 years conditioning myself for that moment. So when I got the opportunity, I grabbed it by the horns and just rode the bull.

Opportunity is like that – it's "ready or not, here I come." A lot of the guys in my community knew who I was because I'd already been doing advocacy work on the inside, so it was a smooth transition in a way. It was just the thing I needed to do. Having been on the inside allowed me to already be in the mindset of the people we were advocating for, and to stand in the gaps for them where the system falls short.

Mentally, it was an adjustment. I was not used to having so many resources available to me and so many people willing to help. It was a little chaotic, trying to figure out my own life while trying to manage advocacy for others at the same time. But nevertheless, we persevere.

**You've been quoted saying "It's difficult to maintain hope when the truth is not enough." What do you wish others understood about the criminal legal system and how difficult it can be not just to get to the truth, but to also have that truth lead to tangible action for folks?**

There are cases where innocence and truth are not going to be enough. I want people to know that the system is not always rooted in a foundation of truth.

It's very difficult to get to the truth in the first place. And though we think the truth will set us free, the reality is that's absolutely not true. More often than not, people will get the same amount of time for being truthful as they would if they said nothing. Innocent people will be punished severely. It's not always based on facts or logic. It can be based on nefarious acts and the word of bad actors.

The truth is elusive when it comes to the legal system. For people who are not familiar with it, that's what I'd want them to know: the system does not work the way you think it does.

**That's such an uncomfortable reality for people to hold. I think we love this idea that we've got a system that's rooted in justice and all we have to do is follow the law and tell the truth and everything will be fine. The reality is that's certainly not the case.**

Unfortunately, our system is run by human beings. And as long as it's run by human beings, there's room for error. Until society as a whole can accept the fact that humans make mistakes, we will forever be stuck in this perpetual mindset that the system is right - even when it's wrong.

**In addition to your work with the Organization of Exonerates, you serve on the board for the Midwest Innocence Project. What impact do you think having a person who's been exonerated in a leadership role has on the quality of representation that an organization like MIP can provide?**

As difficult as this question is, I think I can sum it up really simply: I traded my innocence for experience.

When it comes to being a voice for people, the importance of having someone like me on the board for organizations like MIP is bringing that lived experience to the conversation. Having an exoneree at the table means being able to remove the guesswork and challenge the assumptions around what we think we should be doing. It makes us less likely to miss the negative impact of some of the decisions that get made behind closed doors.

Bringing that lived experience to the conversation is invaluable, and I'm grateful that I was chosen to do it. I wear that badge of honor with pride. Having a voice in a room so big and so meaningful is something that I cherish deeply.

People who have been impacted by injustice have historically been locked out of the decision making rooms. The criminal justice reform community has historically been driven by academics and lawyers and experts in their fields. But I think having experience like mine at the table changes things. Because we lived it, we can speak directly to the good, the bad, and even the ugly that this work involves.

**There's so much gratitude in your advocacy work. But once you were exonerated, you could have just walked away from all this. You could have said "I don't want to engage with this anymore. I'm going to go live my life for me." Instead, you chose to stay engaged. What is it that keeps you committed to this work?**

I can be for someone else what I wish someone was for me.

Every day that I sat in the cage, I wished someone was fighting for me as hard as I'm going for others. I wished someone was on the news, screaming my name, advocating for me. Those long days in the courtroom, I wished when I looked over my shoulder, I'd see people there, even strangers, supporting me.

I didn't have that. So for me, being able to give others what I didn't have is extremely meaningful. That's what wakes me up every day. That's what gets me going. Just knowing that I can bring peace and some form of grounding to someone else. It's knowing that when another innocent, still incarcerated person gets to their court hearing and looks over their shoulder, they'll see three or four different exonerees who have gone through the same experience and are there to support them.

There's a connection between us that nobody else in that room will ever understand.

I think it's important that we continue to try to bring hope, that we continue to push the narrative of change. And I think it's important for people that have been negatively impacted by the system to control our own narrative. Our stories typically get told by someone else, but having a voice to speak about the injustice you experienced is important.

I refuse to let anybody else speak for me.

**Once folks understand what's wrong with the criminal legal system, is there anything they can do to help right those wrongs?**

The honest answer is: probably a lot more than you realize.

You can donate and support organizations like MIP. If you don't have money, you can volunteer your time. If you don't have time to volunteer, you can donate air miles or Uber credits. You can listen to, read, and share stories, or call your representatives. You can amplify the voices of innocent individuals who deserve to be heard.

When it comes to the work of reforming justice – working together to get to the root cause of the injustice in our system – everybody can do something.

There's always something to do.

Criminal justice reform is impacted the most by who holds decision-making power, and the people decide who gets that kind of power! So get out there and vote. Every election matters, and your voice can be a catalyst for change.

**Read [MIP's 2024 Annual Report](#) to learn more about the stories of innocent individuals and how we're working together to create change. Share these stories with others to amplify their voices and spread awareness.**