

Genetic genealogy proves Great North Innocence Project client's innocence, identifies actual perpetrator

Robert Bintz, who was convicted along with his brother David Bintz in the 1987 slaying of Sandra Lison, is now set to be released after 25 years of wrongful incarceration

(Minneapolis, MN) – The Great North Innocence Project (GNIP) and its pro bono partners at the Minneapolis law firm Chestnut Cambronne, PA, announced today that their client Robert Bintz, along with his brother David Bintz who is represented by the Wisconsin Innocence Project, will be released from Oakhill Correctional Institution after spending 25 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. His release comes on the heels of DNA results that prove the true perpetrator in Ms. Lison's slaying to be William Joseph Hendricks, a convicted rapist who died in 2000.

“We are thrilled to see our innocent client Robert Bintz released from prison and returned to his loved ones after a quarter-century of wrongful imprisonment,” said Jim Mayer, the Great North Innocence Project's Legal Director. “This result could not have been achieved without remarkable cooperation between the defense attorneys, the Investigative Genetic Genealogy Center at Ramapo College, Bode Cellmark Laboratories, the Brown County District Attorney's Office, the Green Bay Police Department, and many others. This case began with the brutal and senseless killing of a kind and beloved woman. It ends today with the correction of a 25-year injustice and, we hope, a measure of closure and healing for the victim's family.”

A tragic murder of a beloved mother and friend

The victim, Sandra Lison, was the Sunday bartender at the Good Times Tavern in Green Bay, Wisconsin. In August 1987, she went missing after working the closing shift. Her partially undressed body was later discovered in the Machickanee State Forest north of the city. Ms. Lison, a single mother of two, had been beaten and then strangled. Law enforcement also determined, based on crime scene conditions and the presence of semen, that Ms. Lison had been sexually assaulted.

David Bintz's problematic confession

Nearly a decade later, David Bintz, in prison for an unrelated offence, was reported by a cellmate to be talking in his sleep. The cellmate pressed David for more information about his nightmares, and later reported to prison officials that David had confessed to killing Ms. Lison along with his brother Robert. This led to an interrogation of David in which he provided confusing and contradictory statements about whether he or Robert were involved in Ms. Lison's murder.

The case against the Bintz brothers faced an immediate hurdle: DNA analysis excluded them as potential sources of the semen recovered from the crime scene. But the prosecution continued, under the new theory that this was not a sexual assault, but rather a simple robbery and murder. The Bintz brothers were convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

New DNA evidence uncovered

In the late 2000s, additional investigative work by the Wisconsin Innocence Project revealed that male blood found on the victim's dress came from the same man who had deposited the semen, lending further support to law enforcement's initial conclusion that the victim had been sexually assaulted. This new discovery was deemed insufficient to warrant a new trial, and the Bintz brothers remained in prison.

In 2019, the Great North Innocence Project and Chestnut Cambronne took up Robert Bintz's defense and obtained a court order for further DNA testing of other crime scene evidence. GNIP's efforts included, with the assistance of Bode Cellmark Laboratories, development of a single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) profile, a type of genetic profile that facilitates the use of genealogy to identify the man who left the semen and blood on the victim's body. In August 2023, the Investigative Genetic Genealogy Center at New Jersey's Ramapo College achieved a breakthrough, narrowing the identity of the person who deposited semen and blood on Ms. Lison to one of three brothers in the Green Bay area.

William Joseph Hendricks, who died in 2000, stood out among this limited pool because of his known location at the time of the crime and his previous convictions, which included breaking into taverns, as well as sexual assaults with elements of strangulation. Mr. Hendricks had completed a prison sentence for rape months before Mr. Lison's abduction. To confirm that Mr. Hendricks was the source of the semen and blood, and very likely the actual perpetrator of Ms. Lison's murder, the Great North Innocence Project obtained a Court Order to exhume Mr. Hendricks' body and collect samples for DNA testing. Mr. Hendricks's body was disinterred on May 30, 2024, and samples were collected by the Brown County Medical Examiner.

On August 8, 2024, Bode Cellmark Laboratories confirmed that it had successfully generated a suitable DNA profile from one of Mr. Hendricks' femurs, 24 years after Mr. Hendricks' death and burial.

On August 15, the Wisconsin State Crime Lab confirmed that William Hendricks was the male who left both blood and semen on Ms. Lison's body. Additional investigation by the Green Bay Police Department revealed the presence of William Hendricks' fingerprints on a cigar box at the Good Times Tavern, and that Hendricks owned an orange Mazda matching witnesses' descriptions of a car seen in the parking lot of the tavern that night.

In light of all the new evidence of innocence, the Brown County Attorney's Office took the unusual step of joining in the defense team's motion to vacate the Bintz brothers' convictions. Following a hearing on September 25, Brown County Circuit Court Judge Donald R. Zuidmulder signed an order calling for their immediate release.

Robert Bintz now looks forward to reconnecting with his family. He is 68 years old.

About the Great North Innocence Project

The mission of the Great North Innocence Project is to free the wrongfully convicted and prevent future wrongful convictions from occurring in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. GNIP, a founding member of the Innocence Network, has screened and investigated individuals' credible claims of actual innocence and represented wrongfully convicted people for over 20 years. GNIP also educates attorneys and other criminal legal professionals on best practices and works to reform the criminal legal system to prevent innocent people from going to prison. For more, visit greatnorthinnocenceproject.org.

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