

Hennepin County Attorney's Office agrees Great North Innocence Project client's conviction should be vacated based on actual innocence

The HCAO's filing comes after the Minnesota Conviction Review Unit determined, "a confluence of errors made by criminal justice system actors resulted in a wrongful conviction" of Edgar Barrientos-Quintana.

(Minneapolis, MN) – Today, the Great North Innocence Project (GNIP) announced that the Hennepin County Attorney's Office filed a petition in support of post-conviction relief for GNIP client Edgar Barrientos-Quintana based on his actual innocence. Mr. Barrientos-Quintana has spent nearly 16 years wrongfully incarcerated for a homicide that he did not commit. The HCAO's filing states that the office "can no longer stand behind the integrity of the convictions that resulted from the trial." The filing comes after a multi-year review of Mr. Barrientos-Quintana's case by the Minnesota Conviction Review Unit, a division of the Minnesota Attorney General's Office, which found that evidence in Mr. Barrientos-Quintana's case "convincingly establishes Barrientos' innocence and that he was convicted of a crime that he did not commit."

Mr. Barrientos-Quintana was sentenced to life without parole in May 2009 for a drive-by shooting in South Minneapolis that killed teenager Jesse Mickelson, an innocent bystander to the presumed gang-related violence. His conviction was largely based on testimony from juvenile eyewitnesses who had connections to a rival gang, and a juvenile who was a supposed accomplice to the shooting. No physical evidence ever linked Mr. Barrientos-Quintana to the crime and the murder weapon was never recovered.

One of Mr. Barrientos-Quintana's attorneys at the Great North Innocence Project, Anna McGinn, said about the filing, "Edgar is completely innocent. There is no valid factual or legal basis to support his conviction. The tragic death of Mr. Mickelson is only compounded by Edgar's continued wrongful incarceration."

The Great North Innocence Project and CRU investigations found that Mr. Barrientos-Quintana had a credible alibi for the time of the shooting. Although the crime occurred in South Minneapolis, Mr. Barrientos-Quintana was seen on surveillance video at a grocery store in East Saint Paul less than 33 minutes prior to the first 911 call regarding the shooting. Phone records from Mr. Barrientos-Quintana's phone also disproved the supposed-accomplice claim that Mr. Barrientos-Quintana contacted him by phone to coordinate the shooting.

Additionally, the CRU agreed with the Great North Innocence Project that investigators used highly problematic eyewitness identification procedures that went against established best practices. Similar to the case of [Marvin Haynes](#), the Great North Innocence Project client who was exonerated in December 2023, investigators used an old photo of Mr. Barrientos-Quintana in photo lineups that more closely matched eyewitness descriptions of the shooter. Additionally, according to the CRU report, investigators "contaminated witnesses' memories on the shooter's hair length through leading questions." Investigators also failed to utilize a double-blind procedure when administering lineups, despite it being Hennepin County policy at the time.

The CRU's comprehensive review of the case file found that investigators used interrogation tactics that were suggestive, threatening, and coercive to juvenile witnesses. The CRU report also notes that investigators "fed a juvenile accomplice witness details of the crime."

Furthermore, the CRU determined that the state either failed to provide, or did not provide in a timely fashion, exculpatory evidence to Mr. Barrientos-Quintana's attorney before his trial as required by the United States and Minnesota Constitutions.

Finally, the Great North Innocence Project and CRU investigations determined that Mr. Barrientos-Quintana's defense counsel was ineffective on numerous fronts, including failing to present exculpatory evidence and failing to challenge the investigators' and eyewitnesses' testimony during trial. In sum, the jury did not receive all of the information related to witness descriptions of the shooter, the various impossible stories told by the juvenile so-

called accomplice, or Mr. Barrientos-Quintana's credible alibi.

Julie Jonas, former legal director at the Great North Innocence Project, now Assistant Professor at University of St. Thomas School of Law who continues to work on the case pro bono, said about the CRU report, "I have been working on Edgar's case for 11 years and he is absolutely innocent. I am so grateful to the Attorney General and the Conviction Review Unit for their report recognizing this and supporting his release from prison."

Now, the Hennepin County Attorney's Office will file a response in Court. Judge John McBride will review the filings and decide as to whether to grant post-conviction relief to Mr. Barrientos-Quintana.

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. The Great North Innocence Project, 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. The Great North Innocence Project 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.

About the Minnesota Conviction Review Unit

The Minnesota Conviction Review Unit operates as a partnership between the Minnesota Attorney General's Office and the Great North Innocence Project. It seeks to identify, remedy, and prevent wrongful convictions. Minnesota's CRU is only the fourth in the United States to operate statewide as a partnership with the state Attorney General's Office, rather than with an individual county prosecutor's office. To date nationwide, CRUs have helped initiate the exoneration of 666 people.

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