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Minnesota Conviction Review Unit (CRU) finds GNIP client innocent, recommends exoneration

The CRU determined, “a confluence of errors made by criminal justice system actors resulted in a wrongful conviction.”

(Minneapolis, MN) – Today, the Great North Innocence Project (GNIP) filed a petition for post-conviction relief in Hennepin County District Court for their client Edgar Barrientos-Quintana on the grounds of actual innocence. Mr. Barrientos-Quintana has spent nearly 16 years wrongfully incarcerated for a homicide that he did not commit. The filing comes after a comprehensive review of his case by the Minnesota Conviction Review Unit, a partnership between GNIP and 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 were members of 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 GNIP, 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 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 GNIP that investigators used highly problematic eyewitness identification procedures that went against established best practices. Similar to the case of [Marvin Haynes](#), GNIP’s 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, GNIP 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 investigator’s and eyewitnesses’ testimony during trial. In sum, the jury did not receive all of the information related to witness descriptions of the shooter or Mr. Barrientos-Quintana’s credible alibi.

Julie Jonas, former legal director at GNIP and an Assistant Professor at University of St. Thomas School of Law

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 Jeannice Reding will review the filings and make a decision 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. 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.

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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