

Great North Innocence Project client pardoned, exonerated 18 years after release from prison

Sherman Townsend was wrongfully convicted of first-degree burglary in 1998

(Saint Paul, MN) – Today, the Great North Innocence Project (GNIP) announced that its first-ever client, Sherman Townsend, received a full pardon on the basis of innocence for his 1998 conviction of first-degree burglary. The Pardon Board voted unanimously to grant Mr. Townsend’s pardon request.

Ahead of his vote in favor of a pardon, Governor Tim Walz said, “Mr. Townsend, I recognize that there is no apology for the 10 years that you spent in prison, but it’s clear to me that we are lucky to have you in our community.”

In his statement to the Pardon Board about what he would do if he were granted a pardon, Mr. Townsend said, “I will finish my years as a free man, in public, being productive, and loving God.”

The decision by the Pardon Board followed a unanimous vote by the Minnesota Clemency Review Commission in November 2024 recommending that Mr. Townsend receive a full pardon. Members of the Commission expressed their apologies to Mr. Townsend for his wrongful conviction and his long-awaited exoneration. Mr. Townsend was released 10 years early from his original prison sentence when the only eyewitness who fingered Mr. Townsend for the crime came forward and admitted in extreme detail to being the true perpetrator.

About the Board’s decision today, Mr. Townsend said, “I am 75 years old, but this makes me want to live another 20 years.”

Mr. Townsend was represented by the Great North Innocence Project legal team and pro bono attorneys Jevon Bindman and Emily Taylor of Maslon LLP. Former legal director of the Great North Innocence Project Julie Jonas was Mr. Townsend’s lead post-conviction attorney.

An exoneration 28 years in the making

Mr. Townsend was convicted of first-degree burglary following an August 1997 home invasion. A man broke into a Dinkytown duplex in the middle of the night, physically assaulted a sleeping couple, and fled. Evidence indicated that the intended purpose was sexual assault. Given the darkness and the chaotic scene, the victims were unable to provide a detailed description of their assailant.

As police surveyed the area outside the home, they encountered David Jones, who lived nearby. Mr. Jones, who was intoxicated at the time, volunteered that he had just seen someone fleeing the crime scene, describing him as a black man wearing shorts and a tee shirt. As police widened their search, they came across Mr. Townsend, a black man wearing shorts and a tee shirt, who was buying a pack of cigarettes at a nearby convenience store. Police took Mr. Townsend to the crime scene where Mr. Jones identified him as the perpetrator. Other than the identification by Mr. Jones and his presence in the neighborhood, there was no evidence connecting Mr. Townsend to the crime.

Despite the weakness of the case, including the victims’ expressed misgivings about Mr. Townsend, 47, appearing much older than the attacker, Mr. Townsend was charged and brought to trial in 1998. Before the trial began, Mr. Townsend rejected a plea deal that would have permitted him to go home with little or no prison time, explaining to the judge that he could not confess to something that he did not do. The trial proceeded, Mr. Jones testified on behalf of the State, and Mr. Townsend was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Years later, in 2012, Mr.

Townsend's defense attorney would be suspended from practicing law in Minnesota.

In 2002, the Great North Innocence Project (then called the Innocence Project of Minnesota) agreed to take Mr. Townsend on as their first client. In 2007, the organization's then-legal director, Julie Jonas, received a letter from the eyewitness in Mr. Townsend's case, Mr. Jones. He wrote that not only did he fabricate his testimony against Mr. Townsend, but that he himself had committed the assault, pointing police to Mr. Townsend to remove suspicion from himself. However, while Mr. Jones was in prison for an unrelated crime, he learned that, because of his false testimony, Mr. Townsend was serving a 20-year sentence for a crime that Mr. Jones had committed. After a crisis of conscience, Mr. Jones came clean. Mr. Jones drew a detailed map of the crime scene, and he disclosed information that only someone involved in the crime would have known.

Shortly thereafter, GNIP filed a petition for post-conviction relief based on new evidence, namely David Jones' detailed recantation. In 2007, an evidentiary hearing was held. Mr. Jones returned to court and described in extreme detail about how he committed the home invasion, and that his intention had been to commit a sexual assault on the female occupant, not expecting that her boyfriend would be in the home.

After Mr. Jones admitted to the crime, no evidence remained implicating Mr. Townsend. While awaiting the judge's decision on whether to grant a new trial, then-Hennepin County District Attorney Mike Freeman offered Mr. Townsend a choice: accept a deal to be resentenced to time served and be released immediately or wait for the ruling and risk facing a new trial, during which Mr. Townsend would likely remain incarcerated.

Given that his mother was very ill at the time, Mr. Townsend took the deal and was released from prison 10 years early on October 2, 2007. His mother passed away four months after his release.

Now that he has been pardoned, Mr. Townsend has cleared his name of this felony conviction.

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.

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