



# IMPACT

## ★ REPORT

# 2022



# GREAT NORTH INNOCENCE PROJECT

Litigate. Educate. Advocate. **Free the innocent.**

The Great North Innocence Project works to free the wrongfully convicted and prevent future wrongful convictions from occurring in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Since our founding in 2001, GNIP has freed 10 innocent people who spent a combined 113 years in prison for crimes they did not commit.

## 20 BY THE NUMBERS

# 22

1,636

HOURS DONATED  
BY PRO BONO  
ATTORNEYS

1,000

PEOPLE REACHED  
THROUGH  
OUTREACH

160

APPLICATIONS  
FOR ASSISTANCE  
RECEIVED

62

ACTIVE  
INNOCENCE  
CASES

1

CLIENT FREED:  
ROBERT KAISER





# TOWARD NEW HORIZONS

A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Dear friends and partners,

In 2022, you propelled our shared work to free innocent people and improve the criminal legal system to prevent wrongful convictions in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Because of your partnership and contributions, we are moving through 2023 with more energy, hope, and ambitious goals.

During 2022, the Great North Innocence Project achieved critical milestones in pursuit of our mission. With your incredible support, our team was able to carefully review 160 applications in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota, deeply investigate 62 cases, and formally represent 17 clients across our three-state region. We trained 70 future attorneys through clinics and courses at four law schools. We also were able to reach over 1,000 community members through education and outreach efforts, including at the women's correctional facility in North Dakota, where we met an innocent person who we now represent.

Most notably, though, we freed another innocent person from prison! In May of 2022, Robert Kaiser returned home to his loved ones and community after over seven years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Following four years of investigation and litigation, the Great North IP legal team, along with pro bono partners from Carlson Caspers and Bassford Remele law firms, succeeded in vacating Robert's conviction and he was released from prison.

Since his release, Robert has found a job as a welder, bought a home, reconnected with old friends, and has been enjoying exploring the outdoors – all things he could not do while wrongfully imprisoned. Unfortunately, Robert's legal journey is not over. The State appealed the trial court's decision in Robert's case, and the Minnesota Court of Appeals affirmed the decision. The prosecutor petitioned the Minnesota Supreme Court for review, and the court has agreed to consider the appeal. The Great North Innocence Project team is committed to representing Robert throughout the entirety of his legal process, even if that were to mean a retrial, with the goal of fully exonerating him.

We are empowered by your ongoing support and the substantive gains we made in 2022 toward a more fair and just criminal legal system. We have much to accomplish in 2023 and hope you'll keep fueling our momentum with your passion and generosity. Thank you for your support of the Great North Innocence Project.

With gratitude,

**Sara Jones, JD**  
**Executive Director**



# ROBERT'S STORY

In 2014, Robert Kaiser was arrested for the murder of his infant son, William. Investigators alleged that Robert shook his son so hard that it caused brain injury leading to the baby's death. However, GNIP's investigation demonstrated that is not what happened, and that Robert is innocent.

In October 2021, a team of pro bono lawyers from Carlson Caspers and Bassford Remele, led by GNIP Managing Attorney Jim Mayer, presented evidence demonstrating Robert's innocence over the course of a two-week hearing.

On April 28, 2022, after four years of investigation and litigation by GNIP, the team achieved victory, and Robert's murder conviction was finally vacated. After posting bail, Robert stepped out of the Stearns County Jail on Monday, May 16, to a crowd of celebratory supporters including family, friends, his pro bono legal team, and GNIP staff. It was his first time outside as a free man in nearly eight years! There were cheers, tears, and hugs, followed by Robert's first meal post-incarceration: a burger and fries.

Reflecting on that day, Robert said, "I went around and gave everybody individual hugs so I wouldn't just break out crying. I could see [the team] all standing out there, and I was so excited."

Now that he is no longer incarcerated, Robert has found work and bought a home. He has even already received a promotion at work. His favorite leisure activities include four-wheeling and visiting with the childhood friends who have stood by him. He also recently adopted a kitten, Katie, who he describes as "brave and cuddly." Robert hopes to visit Valley Fair in the near future. He considers himself a "rollercoaster guy," but the last time he was able to go was when he was eight years old.

Unfortunately, Robert's legal journey is not yet over. The State has appealed his vacated conviction up to the Minnesota Supreme Court, which recently agreed to review the case. Robert's GNIP legal team, including the pro bono attorneys who have already given generous amounts of time to this case, are dedicated to representing Robert until justice is served.



Robert with his pro bono lawyers (from left) Samuel Lockner, Mark Bradford, Alexandra Olson, and Megan Christner, winners of the 2022 Pro Bono Champions of the Year Award sponsored by Delta Airlines



**I'm not angry...  
I can't live with that kind of  
anger because it will eat you up  
inside. I gave up on being angry.  
Instead, I started wishing everyone  
the best. I stopped praying for myself  
and started praying for everybody else.**  
**- Robert Kaiser**

# HIGHLIGHTS

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2022 was an exciting year at the Great North Innocence Project. In addition to Robert Kaiser's long overdue release from incarceration, GNIP's team celebrated numerous other wins and advanced our work in the areas of litigation, education, and advocacy, teeing up 2023 to be our most litigation and policy-heavy year yet.



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## Investigation & Litigation

The Great North IP legal team formally accepted **four new innocent clients** in 2022. We continue to actively litigate these cases to pursue relief for these wrongfully convicted people. Our team welcomed **GNIP's first legal fellow**, Anna McGinn. Anna has significantly increased our capacity to investigate and litigate potential innocence cases. GNIP successfully **secured a \$500,000 federal grant** funding the Minnesota Conviction Review Unit, the same body that would work with GNIP to release Thomas Rhodes from prison after 25 years in 2023.

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## Education & Outreach

With the hiring of **GNIP's first director of development and director of communications & outreach**, our team scaled education and outreach efforts significantly in 2022. We **presented for the first time at the North Dakota women's prison**, resulting in meeting Cassandra Black Elk who GNIP would help free in 2023. We hosted attorney and author **Rabia Chaudry** and IP Director of Strategic Litigation **Chris Fabricant** for discussions on media, junk science, and the criminal legal system. We amplified GNIP's work at events honoring **Juneteenth and Wrongful Conviction Day**. In the fall, we hosted our first in-person **Benefit for Innocence** in three years. GNIP's freed clients Ronnie Cooper and Mike Hansen joined us for their first **Innocence Network National Conference**, which brought advocates together in Phoenix, Arizona, to share expertise, build the movement, and find healing in togetherness.

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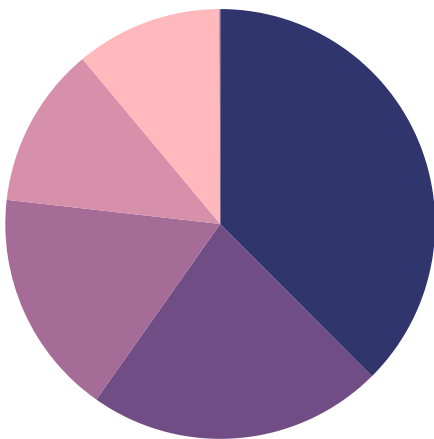
## Advocacy

In 2022, GNIP made its **first foray into advocacy at the South Dakota legislature** and found success in passing our proposed bills out of the Senate Judiciary Committee. before they were voted down by the full Senate. 2022 also saw three more **people compensated through the Imprisonment and Exoneration Remedies Act**, a 2014 law advocated for by GNIP and our former legal director, Julie Jonas.





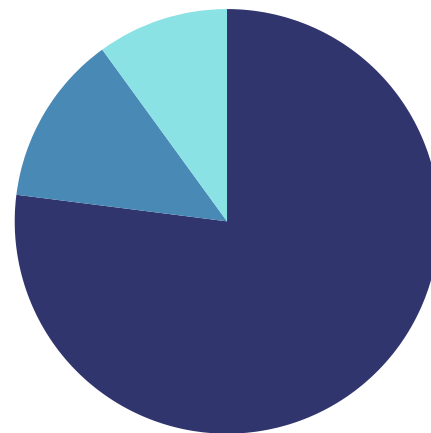
## FINANCIALS



Revenue  
**\$1,209,827.92**

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Foundations	38%
Events	22%
Individuals	17%
Corporate	12%
Government	11%
Investment Interest	<1%



Expenses  
**\$1,342,064.58**

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Programs	77%
Fundraising	13%
Administration	10%

For more information please contact:  
**Sara Jones, Executive Director**  
[sjones@gn-ip.org](mailto:sjones@gn-ip.org)

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Taft

**“** We are deeply grateful to the partners and supporters of GNIP - your unwavering contributions empower us to pursue justice with excited determination and make a profound impact in the lives of innocent individuals who have been wrongfully convicted in our Great North region.  
- John Kingrey & Kevin Riach,  
Board Co-Chairs



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**“ I can’t imagine anything more scary, frustrating, and dehumanizing than being wrongfully accused, convicted, and incarcerated for a crime I didn’t commit. I choose to support GNIP to be a voice and advocate for those caught in the criminal justice system who need help correcting such egregious injustices. - Catherine Lipinsky, donor**


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**We support the  
 Great North Innocence Project  
 because the criminal-legal system  
 is broken and innocent people are  
 losing days, months, and years to  
 wrongful convictions. The work of  
 GNIP is critical in helping individuals  
 regain their freedom and reunite with  
 their families and loved ones.  
 - Heidi Tieszen & Doug Ries, donors**



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