

**20
23**

**ANNUAL
IMPACT
REPORT**



GREAT★NORTH
INNOCENCE PROJECT

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 12 innocent people who spent a combined 157 years in prison for crimes they did not commit.

BY THE NUMBERS

1

BILL PASSED

3

CLIENTS FREED

16

CLIENTS
REPRESENTED

69

CASES
INVESTIGATED

192

REQUESTS FOR
ASSISTANCE

1,000+

PEOPLE
EDUCATED

2,965

PRO BONO
HOURS DONATED





STORIES FROM THE GREAT NORTH

A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear friends and partners,

GNIP has achieved significant milestones in 2023, each made possible by the unwavering commitment from our community of supporters. You have been the catalyst for justice, helping us transform lives and reunite families.

This year, GNIP has tirelessly advocated for reforms that would enhance fairness, accuracy, and accountability in the Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota criminal legal systems. Your support has been instrumental in laying the groundwork to prevent wrongful convictions at their source. Our outreach programs, including prison visits and building relationships with communities throughout the geography of our tristate region, have helped us reach those who most need our services as well as new supporters for our shared cause.

In what has been the most litigation-heavy year in our 22-year history, we secured the freedom of three innocent people, Thomas Rhodes, Cassandra Black Elk, and Marvin Haynes.

These three innocent people collectively spent nearly 47 years in prison for crimes that they did not commit, and in two of the three cases, never occurred. These victories are not only a triumph over injustice but also a beacon of hope for others in similar circumstances.

Beyond our litigation work, the Great North Innocence Project made significant strides towards preventing wrongful convictions through our policy advocacy efforts. During our first year advocating for criminal legal reforms in North Dakota, we successfully passed a bill that mandates a study of custodial interrogation recording and storage practices of law enforcement agencies statewide. Recording interrogations is a key tool in preventing coerced confessions, and the results of the study will inform GNIP's future policy advocacy in the state. We also made strides towards advancing legislation in Minnesota that would end the use of deceptive interrogation tactics by law enforcement. We feel confident that this legislation will move forward in the next legislative session.

Additionally, GNIP expanded our outreach and education efforts across our tri-state region to educate criminal legal professionals about the causes of wrongful convictions and how they can address them at their source.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to you. Your generosity and commitment make our work possible. Together, we can continue to make a difference, one life, one family, one story at a time.

With gratitude,

Sara Jones, JD
Executive Director

CLIENT STORIES

2023 was an exciting year at the Great North Innocence Project. During this record-breaking year, GNIP freed three innocent people from prison: Thomas Rhodes, Cassandra Black Elk, and Marvin Haynes.

Thomas Rhodes

In 1998, Tom Rhodes was convicted of first degree pre-meditated murder and second degree intentional murder for the murder of his wife, Jane Rhodes. He was sentenced to life in prison.

On August 2, 1996, Mrs. Rhodes fell overboard and ultimately drowned during a nighttime boat ride with her husband. Upon seeing his wife fall into the water, Tom turned the boat around in attempt to save his wife. He jumped into the water, but in the darkness, was unable to find her. He rushed back to shore and called 9-1-1. Authorities arrived but unsuccessfully attempted to locate Mrs. Rhodes.



The next morning, fishermen found Mrs. Rhodes' body about 9/10 of a mile from where Tom said she fell overboard and called police. While Tom always maintained that his wife's death was a tragic accident and that he attempted every effort to save her, authorities concluded that he killed his wife.

Investigations by the Great North Innocence Project and the Minnesota Conviction Review Unit (CRU) found significant issues with testimony that was key to the state's case against Mr. Rhodes. Nine forensic pathologists reviewed Mrs. Rhodes' autopsy and all independently determined that the state's medical examiner, Dr. Michael McGee, was incorrect in his assessment of Mrs. Rhodes' injuries. The state has never brought another medical examiner forward who agreed with Dr. McGee's testimony.

The GNIP investigation also uncovered factual inaccuracies in the testimony of the "water expert" and the CRU found that the prosecutor's office withheld exculpatory evidence from the defense. Finally, in January 2023, Tom's conviction was vacated and he was released from prison after nearly 25 years. He now is focusing on spending time with his sons and six grand children.

CLIENT STORIES

Cassandra Black Elk

In August 2022, Cassandra (Cassi) Black Elk awoke to find her infant daughter StarLight unresponsive. She immediately called emergency services, but tragically, StarLight passed away. Although there were no external injuries to the baby, police immediately took Cassi to the police station where she was interrogated for hours.

Police told Cassi numerous lies: that they knew she hurt StarLight, that her baby had been shaken, and that sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is not real. Cassi maintained that she had done nothing to hurt StarLight, however she was charged with child neglect anyway.

Cassi's public defender advised her to plead guilty so to receive a lesser sentence. When Cassi asked to see her daughter's autopsy report believing it would prove her innocence, the attorney advised they would "deal with that later." Cassi pled guilty and was sent to prison, while her two other young children were put in foster care.

While in prison, Cassi herself pushed to receive a copy of the autopsy report. When she finally obtained it, it showed that her baby had indeed passed away from SIDS and that StarLight was well taken care of and otherwise healthy.



After GNIP learned about her case during a visit to the ND Women's Prison, GNIP agreed to represent Cassi and litigated her case up to the North Dakota Supreme Court. Ultimately, the State filed a motion to dismiss its own case with prejudice, in the "interest of justice." The following day, October 20, 2023, the court entered an order dismissing the charges with prejudice, exonerating Cassi of all charges.

CLIENT STORIES

Marvin Haynes

Marvin Haynes was convicted of first-degree murder in the shooting death of Harry “Randy” Sherer at a flower shop in North Minneapolis in May 2004. The conviction rested on the eyewitness identification testimony of Mr. Sherer’s sister, Cynthia McDermid, who was working at the flower shop that day, and of Ravi Seeley, a teenager who saw the assailant flee the shop. Both witnesses described the assailant as a young Black male with “short, close-cropped hair.” There was no physical or video surveillance evidence pointing to the identity of the assailant.



GNIP’s team found that the eyewitness evidence used to convict Mr. Haynes was fraught with problems from the start. Officers repeatedly deviated from best practices for lineup procedures. Among several other errors, police used a two-year old photo of Mr. Haynes in the lineup that more closely matched witness descriptions instead of a current photo. Officers also administered the lineups themselves in lieu of a

“double-blind” protocol. It is well documented that forgoing a double-blind lineup protocol substantially increases the risk of suggesting the identity of the suspect to witnesses. They also showed both eyewitnesses multiple lineups, even though it is well established that subjecting witnesses to multiple viewings of a suspect risks tainting the identification.

Mr. Haynes’ legal team filed a Petition for Post-Conviction Relief in Hennepin County District Court in June 2023, and an evidentiary hearing was held in November 2023. After the hearing during which GNIP attorneys presented evidence showing that the identification procedures used to convict Mr. Haynes were inconsistent with best practices and unnecessarily suggestive, the Hennepin County Attorney’s Office agreed to vacate Mr. Haynes’ conviction. The State agreed that “the interests of justice would be served by dismissing with prejudice all charges.”

Mr. Haynes was released from Stillwater Prison and fully exonerated on December 11, 2023, 19 years after his wrongful conviction.

HIGHLIGHTS

2023 was an exciting year at the Great North Innocence Project. In addition to a record-breaking three wrongfully clients freed from incarceration, GNIP's team celebrated numerous other wins and advanced our work in the areas of litigation, education, and advocacy, teeing up 2024 to be a year of robust work to free the innocent and advance a legislative agenda to prevent wrongful convictions.

LEGAL

The Great North IP legal team freed three wrongfully convicted people in 2023. In addition, GNIP's legal team reviewed and investigated 343 cases and are formally representing 16 clients. The legal team represented many of these clients in hearings marking crucial steps towards freedom. GNIP awaits decisions in Amy Wilkerson's case in Mississippi, Bertie Hick's case in Louisiana, and Robert Kaiser's case in Minnesota. GNIP also is representing a number of clients in front of the Minnesota Conviction Review Unit, and expects decisions in the coming year.

OUTREACH

The Great North Innocence Project expanded education and outreach efforts during 2023 to educate the public about the most common causes of wrongful convictions and how to address them at their source. GNIP launched a volunteer-led Speakers Bureau to expand our capacity to educate the public about wrongful convictions. We also continued outreach to correctional facilities in the region to ensure all justice-impacted people are aware of GNIP's free legal services and how to access them. During one such outreach visit, GNIP's team met Cassandra Black Elk who we would later exonerate this year.

POLICY

During our first year advocating for criminal legal reforms in North Dakota, we successfully passed a bill that mandates a study of custodial interrogation recording and storage practices of law enforcement agencies statewide. Recording interrogations is a key tool in preventing coerced confessions, and the results of the study will inform GNIP's future policy advocacy in the state. We also made strides towards advancing legislation in Minnesota that would end the use of deceptive interrogation tactics by law enforcement. We feel confident that this legislation will move forward in the next legislative session.

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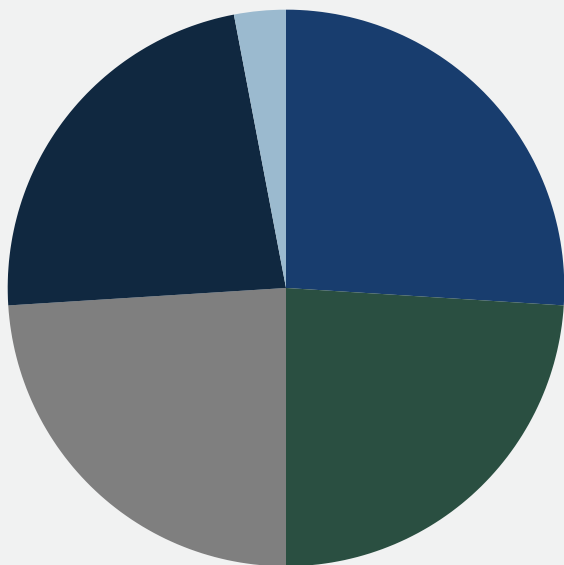
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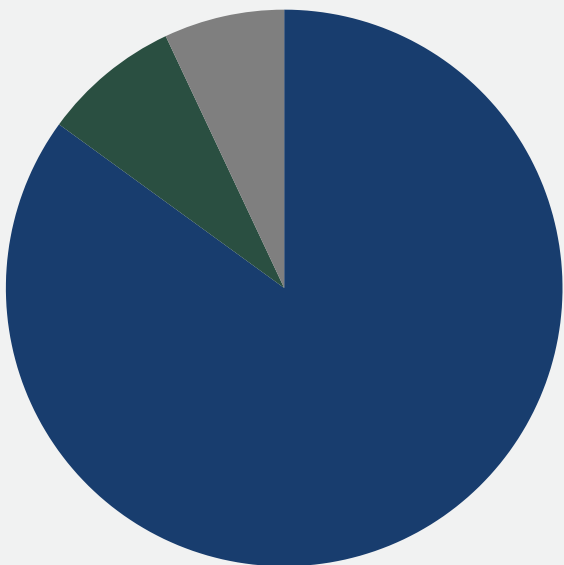
Taft

FINANCIALS



Revenue
\$1,187,613

Government	26%
Foundations	24%
Events	24%
Individual Contributions	23%
Corporate	3%



Expenses
\$1,236,199

Programs	75%
Fundraising	13%
Administration	12%

For more information please contact:
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THANK YOU TO ALL OUR DONORS AND PARTNERS

Your support makes it possible for the Great North Innocence Project to free the innocent and prevent future wrongful convictions in our Great North region.



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