

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTACT: Hayley Poxleitner, Director of Communications & Community Outreach

hdrozowski-poxleitner@gn-ip.org

(612) 444-1063

Judge vacates Great North Innocence Project client's decades-old murder conviction

North Dakota District Court Judge Daniel Narum vacated Werner Rümmer-Kunkel's conviction after finding the State withheld exculpatory evidence

(Devils Lake, ND) – Today, the Great North Innocence Project (GNIP) announced that North Dakota's Ramsey County District Court has overturned Werner Rümmer-Kunkel's 1995 murder conviction. Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel has spent 31 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

Upon learning that his conviction was vacated, Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel said, "I refuse to let three decades of wrongful imprisonment define me. I am hurt, but I am not angry. I am looking only to heal, to spend time with my family, and to be the best man that I can be. I am grateful to the Court and to my lawyers at the Great North Innocence Project and Ringstrom DeKrey."

In 1995, a jury found Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel guilty of Gilbert Fassett's murder. Nine years earlier, on August 10, 1986, berry pickers had discovered Mr. Fassett's body on a wooded hillside on the Spirit Lake Reservation near Devils Lake, North Dakota. He had been stabbed over 100 times.

During a January 2026 evidentiary hearing, Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel's legal team presented newly discovered evidence that the State violated Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel's due process rights by withholding witness statements that would have contradicted the State's timeline of the case and established Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel's innocence. GNIP also presented forensic evidence further establishing that Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel could not have been Mr. Fassett's killer.

In the order vacating Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel's conviction, Judge Narum found that "the State failed to disclose exculpatory evidence entitling Kunkel to relief" and that "the evidence as a whole, including the newly discovered evidence, shows Kunkel cannot be the person committing the crime in the State's timeline."

After receiving the judge's order, GNIP Legal Director James Mayer said, "This case illustrates yet again the risk of locking someone up for life based on questionable testimony from jailhouse informants. Helping Werner and his family get justice has been the honor of a lifetime."

GNIP pro bono partner Dane DeKrey of Ringstrom DeKrey said, "The way I felt when I learned Werner's conviction was overturned is indescribable. It's something you chase your whole life as a lawyer. And as great as that was, it pales in comparison to the relief I feel for Werner. He's the true hero here."

Seeking Post-Conviction Relief

After several failed attempts at obtaining post-conviction relief on his own, Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel contacted the Great North Innocence Project who agreed to take his case. The legal team presented their findings at an evidentiary hearing in January 2026.

GNIP's legal team presented the new forensic evidence contradicting the State's timeline of the crime and demonstrating the State committed a *Brady* violation by withholding exculpatory witness statements from Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel's defense counsel. Finally, they also presented evidence that the State allowed critical untested crime scene evidence, including Mr. Fassett's clothing, to be lost or intentionally destroyed, thus preventing testing and analysis that could reveal the identity of the true perpetrator. After hearing the evidence, the Court issued a detailed 60-page order, concluding that Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel did not receive a fair trial and that his conviction cannot stand.

Next Steps

GNIP and its pro bono partners at Ringstrom DeKrey have filed a motion seeking Mr. Rümmer-Kunkel's immediate release while the State decides whether it will appeal, retry him, or dismiss the charges.

Mr. DeKrey added about the process, "They say the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. Werner's case really tested Dr. King's words. But he will be free at last, and that is truly incredible."

About the Great North Innocence Project

The Great North Innocence Project (GNIP) frees people convicted of crimes they did not commit and prevents wrongful convictions. 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 25 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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