Coming back after wrongful conviction

When people in prison for crimes they didn’t commit are freed, the journey back has just begun. Exonerees—people exonerated of crimes for which they were convicted—have lost years of family time, earning power, and every other opportunity. They’ve been through the significant emotional trauma of incarcerated life. Frequently they have no money, no place to live, no ID or access to medical care, few current technology skills, and only the clothes they’re wearing.

With support for new transitional housing, Life After Innocence continues reintegrating the exonerated into the world outside prison.

“The trajectory of my life has all gone around my wrongful conviction, and that’s not all bad. Now I have an opportunity to keep other people from experiencing what I’ve experienced.”

- Jarrett Adams

SERVING JUSTICE
“A lot of guys are getting exonerated and have nowhere to go. They’re put in situations that are really dangerous for them.”

—Exoneree Antoine Day

COMING BACK AFTER WRONGFUL CONVICTION

Yet the justice system isn’t set up for helping exonerates get back on their feet and reenter society. A number of innocence projects work to release people who are in prison for crimes they didn’t commit—but there are very few resources for individuals once they’re exonerated. Loyola’s Life After Innocence (LAI) program, founded and directed by Laura Caldwell (JD ’92), fills a vital need by offering guidance, pro bono legal services, and additional support on all levels to exonerees. “Our exonerees have served an average of 20 years in prison,” says Caldwell, who notes that wrongful convictions in Illinois have resulted in more than 1,000 years in jail and $3 million to taxpayers. And, contrary to a general belief that those wrongly convicted regularly receive reparation, less than a third of exonerees receive any kind of financial judgment.

LAI is designed as a clinical program that gives Loyola law students practical, skill-building experience while addressing the unmet needs of exonerees. LAI students and professors help exonerees expunge their records, find housing, search for employment, obtain counseling, procure identification, obtain computer and cell phone skills, secure medical treatment, gain Certificates of Innocence, and work with money managers to deal with any kind of financial judgment. LAI is designed as a clinical program that gives Loyola law students practical, skill-building experience while addressing the unmet needs of exonerees. LAI students and professors help exonerees expunge their records, find housing, search for employment, obtain counseling, procure identification, obtain computer and cell phone skills, secure medical treatment, gain Certificates of Innocence, and work with money managers to deal with any kind of financial judgment.

Launching pad for a new life

A significant spinoff of LAI’s Life After Justice, a project spearheaded by exonerees Jamett Adams and Antoine Day. Adams, who served nearly 10 years for a rape he didn’t commit, says he was offered a place at several other prestigious law schools while he was a law student at Loyola and a full-time investigator for exonerees. “Their approach was a critical unmet need of exonerees, many of whom leave prison with no place to stay: Life After Justice, a 501(c)(3) organization, aims to provide a base of housing plus an overlay of training and counseling services to help exonerees find jobs, address their emotional issues, and reinforce their adjustment to their new freedom. Located at 5130 West Quincy Avenue on Chicago’s West Side, the Life After Justice building originally belonged to Day’s aunt. Renovations, an active part of the building, which has performed at venues across the country.

LAI’s reach is fueled by school support and pro bono and financial contributions of alumni and other supporters. These benefactors help fund—somewhere, somewhere, somewhere—organizations to be admitted to the Innocence Network. LAI’s reach is fueled by school support and pro bono and financial contributions of alumni and other supporters. These benefactors help fund—somewhere, somewhere, somewhere—organizations to be admitted to the Innocence Network.

In addition to Life after Justice, LAI has made a number of other recent strides. Supported by Loyola alumni John Culbertson (JD ’74), Illinois State Senate president, and Michael Madigan (JD ’67), speaker of the Illinois House, LAI pushed for legislation that automatically expunges—and rather than seals or leaves intact—the records of exonerees when they obtain Certification of Innocence. Previously, exonerees had to go through a separate, arduous process to obtain expungement. LAI also led successful efforts to encourage the Illinois General Assembly to pass legislation that adds certain mental-health benefits for exonerees. LAI also became the first “aftercare” organization to be admitted to the Innocence Conference, an international conference at which exonerees and supporting organizations gather annually. “Exonerees come away from the conference feeling like they’re not the only ones who’ve been through this,” says Caldwell. “They get support that lasts them down the line,” while participating organizations trade tips and best practices.

Last fall, LAI sponsored the first annual Rock for Innocence fundraiser. The event featured the Exoneree Band, a diverse mix of musicians who served a combined 87 years for crimes they did not commit. Day, a drummer who sometimes is an active part of the band, which has performed at venues across the country.

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