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Crime

Judge clears man who spent 31 years in prison for Dallas rape

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A Dallas man who was released from prison three years ago for a rape he always maintained he didn't commit has finally been declared innocent by a state district judge.

Rickey Dale Wyatt's attorney, John Raley, called the judge's order "happy holiday news" and said his client was "ecstatic, euphoric and very grateful to everyone involved," including the attorneys with the Innocence Project who pushed for his release.

Last Thursday, Dallas County District Attorney Craig Watkins asked the court to dismiss the indictment that led to Wyatt's conviction. "There is no credible evidence" that implicates Wyatt, the filing said. Wyatt was much smaller than the man who committed the crime, and the district attorney now believes he is "actually innocent of the crime for which he was sentenced."

The motion to dismiss also said DNA testing showed that Wyatt could not have committed the 1980 rape. When he was released three years ago, prosecutors did not yet have the DNA evidence they said they needed to exonerate him. Russell Wilson, who leads the Conviction Integrity Unit in the district attorney's office, vowed to keep digging.

State District Judge Dominique Collins signed the order dismissing the case late last week: "The Court finds the defendant is actually innocent."

Raley said: “Like most good things in life, this has been a team effort. We appreciate the DA’s office looking at the evidence and reaching this conclusion.”

Wyatt was released from prison in 2012 at the age of 56, having spent 31 years behind bars. Attorneys with the Innocence Project said prosecutors on the original case had withheld evidence that would have acquitted him, and state District Judge John Creuzot agreed.

But when Wyatt was released, he was not proclaimed innocent. Creuzot said at the time that his case was “not there yet.” Maybe it would get there, he said, if and when prosecutors found the evidence. Maybe. One day.

That day was Dec. 18, according to documents filed in federal court on Christmas Eve.

Raley — who earlier this year filed a federal lawsuit against the city, the Police Department and the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences — is now hoping the state will expedite paying Wyatt the money he’s owed for being wrongfully imprisoned for more than three decades. He’s entitled to \$80,000 a year for each year he was behind bars.

In Wyatt's case, that adds up to \$2.5 million.

Raley said he would move to dismiss his suit against the city and the other defendants only when his client is paid the money coming to him.

“The timing of this compensation involves factors beyond Mr. Wyatt's control,” says Raley's Christmas Eve filing containing Collins' order. “When the process is complete, and funding is approved and allocated, Mr. Wyatt intends to accept the funding and nonsuit the case. Until then, Mr. Wyatt wishes this case to remain on file to assure that all his rights are protected.”

Wyatt was actually arrested in connection with three rapes, but tried in just one. Attorneys with the Innocence Project discovered that the victim in that case had not identified Wyatt as her attacker during a live police line-up. Prosecutors and police also withheld evidence that Wyatt didn't fit the victim's description of her attacker. Innocence Project attorneys alleged prosecutorial misconduct. In 2012, the judge and district attorney agreed.

When Wyatt was sent to prison, his daughter was 3. He would go on to become the longest-serving exonerated

man behind bars in the state's history.

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