

Help Heal 26 Innocent Men Freed from Louisiana Prisons



Left: Exoneree Allen Coco's release from prison after 11 years of wrongful incarceration, October 2006. Middle: Allen as an advocate for justice, 2007. Right: Allen dying of untreated cancerous tumors, August 2008, aged 38.

Allen Coco's Story

Allen Coco was 29 years old in 1995 – the year he was convicted of rape. The evidence was absurd: Allen resembled the police composite sketch; yet the victim herself admitted that the sketch did not accurately portray her attacker. Other physical identifying marks, such as tattoos and a lack of wounds, indicated that Allen was innocent. Nonetheless, Allen was convicted in 1997 and sentenced to life without parole. During his ten years in Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Allen became known for his poetry.

The nonprofit organization Innocence Project New Orleans began representing Allen in 2004 and, over the State's objections, started DNA testing. After two years of repeated tests, all of which excluded Allen as the perpetrator, Allen was exonerated.

On August 6, 2008, the cancer that had been growing in Allen during his years in Angola killed him. Although Allen had repeatedly asked for medical care in prison, he was simply given Motrin and sent back to the dorm. Allen died with tumors covering his ribcage, spine, pelvis, and neck. The largest of his tumors weighed 8 lbs.

Always a poet, Allen spent his final days speaking out against injustice and fighting for hope. A month before his death, Allen said: "There's suffering, man...(but) there's got to be something greater. For a person to go through something like this, there has to be a light at the end of the tunnel, something to reach for. I hope. I hope this brings change. Hoping I make it through to embrace something that's going to be wonderful in the end."

Wrongful Conviction and Resurrection After Exoneration

Since 1991, over 400 incarcerated Americans have been found factually innocent and released from death row and life sentences. Many of these individuals are exonerated based on DNA evidence; others are recognized as innocent and freed based on the uncovering of eyewitness misidentification, false confessions, the use of jailhouse informants, incompetent or inadequate defense lawyering; and prosecutorial and police misconduct.

Louisiana holds the record for the most exonerations per capita. During their incarceration, exonerees dream of the day they will be recognized as innocent and released. After decades of prison abuse, however, exonerees are psychologically and physically traumatized, and these scars are not erased by regained freedom. Upon their release, exonerees are given a \$10 check and a bag with their possessions and told to leave; they are issued no apology from the Department of Public Safety and Corrections, and they must complete a lengthy and costly pardon process to get their record expunged. After their release, exonerees are abandoned by the system, and are not permitted access to traditional reentry and parole programs designed to reintegrate the formerly incarcerated.

Exonerees are consistently denied employment due to their ‘criminal record’. As such, the majority of exonerees cannot afford health insurance and have no way of remedying the physical and psychological toll of decades spent in the Louisiana prison system. Many exonerees suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and are subject to depression and recidivism.

Resurrection After Exoneration (RAE) asks that you help heal Louisiana’s exonerees. RAE is committed to meeting the basic medical and mental health needs of these men so they can go on take advantage of the other services RAE provides.

Resurrection After Exoneration was founded in 2006 by John Thompson, a New Orleans native. In May 2003 John was exonerated after spending 18 years in the Louisiana prison system, 14 of them on Angola’s Death Row. After his release, John quickly became aware of the enormous challenges facing returning exonerees. Unprepared to meet life on the outside and without resources, many exonerees buckle under the pressure. In response, John created RAE to meet the immediate and long-term needs of exonerees.

Currently, RAE provides transitional housing, psychological counseling, medical care, and life skills training to exonerees. Over the coming months, RAE intends to expand its operations to the extensive community of Louisiana’s formerly incarcerated, as well as open a public gallery showcasing wrongful conviction and incarceration. RAE’s exonerees are committed to speaking out against the criminal injustice, and are positioning themselves as community leaders and educators on wrongful conviction and criminal injustice.