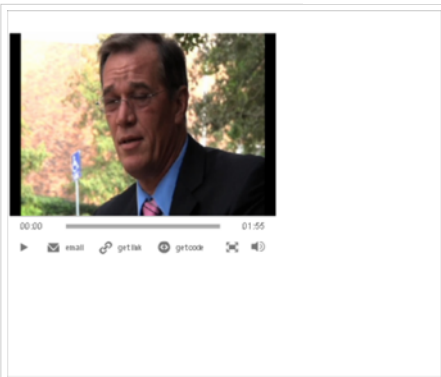


# Man works to help those wrongly convicted, like himself

He is working to aid those falsely convicted, such as himself.

BY BRIDGET MURPHY | STORY UPDATED AT 3:31 AM ON SATURDAY, JAN. 30, 2010

Video Photos



Just more than a year ago, freedom flooded William Dillon's life like a sweet intoxicant.

It is in the clean air he breathes, the trees he can see, the feeling the 50-year-old gets when he wakes in the morning.

"Even to the last five minutes, I didn't think it was going to happen," he said of his 2008 prison release. "When it did, I was drunk with euphoria."

Dillon said he spent 27 years behind bars in Florida for a 1981 Brevard County homicide that DNA testing showed he didn't commit. In November 2008, he stepped out of the darkness of a life in prison and into the limelight as the person believed to have spent the most time wrongly incarcerated of all exonerees in America proven innocent by DNA testing.

Dillon was in Jacksonville on Friday to address lawyers and other employees gathered for the annual meeting of the Fourth Circuit Public Defender's Office.

In August 1981, detectives arrested Dillon for the beating death of a male construction worker whose nude body they found in the woods near the beach. He said police approached him days after the homicide. He was smoking marijuana in a car by the beach, planning to go inside a nearby bar with his brother.

When police asked, Dillon said he knew about the homicide because he had read newspaper reports. But police had a different idea and asked him to come in for questioning the next day. Then 21, Dillon said he agreed but never showed up. Days later, he heard law enforcement officials were looking for him. He called them, agreeing after detectives came to his family's house to go with them to do a test or two.

"I know I can pass it," he recalled thinking at the time. "I haven't committed any crime."

So began what Dillon described as a frame-up by law-enforcement officials desperate to arrest a killer "because the people were upset someone was beat on the beach and they didn't have a suspect."

He said the evidence against him included an eyewitness identification by a truck driver who was legally blind in one eye. The morning of the homicide, the driver had picked up a hitchhiker near the beach with a bloody T-shirt and had sex with him before dropping him at a bar. The man found the bloody T-shirt in his truck later and dumped it in a trash can.

Dillon said the man called police after he saw a news report on the killing and they recovered the T-shirt. It was testing on that shirt that led to Dillon's freedom nearly three decades later. Today, the homicide case remains unsolved.

But back in 1981, the case against Dillon gathered steam after a civilian dog handler and his canine partner used a technique later proven fraudulent to connect him to the crime scene. At his trial, a man facing a rape charge testified that Dillon confessed to him in lockup. Then a woman Dillon dated that summer testified she saw him standing over the victim's body wearing the bloody T-shirt.

Dillon said the woman recanted shortly after the trial. It also came out that she had sex with the case's lead detective as he investigated the crime.

But Dillon said the courts denied his appeals as he lived a life of horrific attacks by inmates in maximum-security Florida prisons, a cycle of brutality that began within his first hour of state lockup.

Dillon said he gave hope one last chance, writing his first legal motion to a judge that asked for DNA testing on the bloody T-shirt. He said the nonprofit legal clinic The Innocence Project got involved in 2007 after the judge granted Dillon's motion.

Dillon said it also was the persistence of a public defender who nearly lost his job standing up for him that brought his innocence out. The exoneree encouraged the public defenders present to look at each case with fresh eyes.

Assistant Public Defender Mark Wright said Dillon's story will inspire him to work harder despite the heavy caseload he and his colleagues carry.

### Want to learn more?

For more on William Dillon's exoneration, go to [www.innocenceproject.org](http://www.innocenceproject.org). He also is working on establishing the William Dillon Freedom Foundation, to aid others who were falsely convicted upon their prison releases. Dillon said his Web site should be up and running by next week at [www.WDFFoundation.org](http://www.WDFFoundation.org).

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"Unfortunately with the limited amount of time ... we do stereotype at times and we need to be reminded of that," he said.

Dillon also said he is working on setting up a foundation to help other exonerees who come out of prison without economic resources. He is relying on help from others to get by financially while earning some honorariums from speaking engagements. He also is waiting for compensation from the state for his wrongful incarceration and going through therapy.

That therapy includes sharing his story, one symbolized by the platinum eagle charm Dillon wears on a chain around his neck. It was a gift from his sweetheart on the year anniversary of his redemption, a day he recently celebrated as a man who believes in truth and the American justice system.

"Today," Dillon said, "I'm a free man because of it."

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