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Wrongly convicted man tells story

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02/01/2010

by Mike Sharkey
Staff Writer

William Dillon has seen the two-minute video before, but it's apparent it's still hard for him to watch. Dillon hangs his head, his eyes well up and eventually there are tears.

There's the image of a long-haired, 21-year-old sitting beside his attorney. There's the timeline from the murder to the arrest to the conviction to the DNA test to the freedom.

There's the image of an older, bespectacled Dillon, this time he's smiling — because he's leaving prison.

Twenty-seven-and-a-half years later.

Friday, Public Defender Matt Shirk brought Dillon in to tell his story to the entire office.

Dillon is methodical and he should be. His arrest, questioning, trial and sentence all proved to be fabrications. He lays out the crime from the joint he was smoking with his brother to the beach they were looking at to the bar across A1A they were waiting to open.

Suddenly, two police officers appeared and the questions started. The police didn't like his answers and asked him to come in the next day.

"I said sure, just to get out of there," he said. "The next day came and went and I forgot about it."

The cops didn't and Dillon was approached a few days later at his parents' house, taken into the station and questioned for hours and hours.

His nightmare was underway.

From the day he was arrested in Canova Beach, which is near Satellite Beach, to the day he was released, Dillon has been pleading his innocence. In between, Dillon lost all sense of innocence in prison and even reached the point of practically giving up.

Then, in a "CSI"-like moment, the State — 27 years later — allowed DNA to be introduced as evidence.

"I spent 27 years in prison for a crime I didn't commit," he said, coming off mildly bitter — can you blame him? — but with more of a mix of professor and preacher.

While in prison, Dillon learned plenty about the law. During those years, the witnesses in his case were discredited in other cases. He wrote hundreds and hundreds of letters, all of which fell on deaf ears and were never returned.

Eventually, Dillon's brother-in-law, who's a detective, reopened the case and Dillon's request for DNA testing was granted. However, most of the evidence was gone, but the bloody shirt that was essential to the prosecution's case was saved by a clerk who worked the original trial.

"She never processed the order to send it back," explained Dillon. "The testing came back and there were no markings for me. They knew it wasn't me, but the State still fought it."

Dillon became the cause for a local Public Defender named Mike Parillo. Dillon calls Parillo his "knight" and still appreciates the work done on his behalf.

"He almost lost his job standing up for me," said Dillon. "He went up against his boss and the prosecutor."

On July 28, 2008, William Dillon became a free man. But, with that freedom came fears. He's been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and is very leery of crowds and people. Almost three decades in prison can do that to a person.

Shirk said he read about Dillon's case and became fascinated.



William Dillon tells members of the Public Defender's Office about his battle to overturn a murder conviction.

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"It inspired me and spoke to me," said Shirk, who urged those who could to help Dillon financially. "He has not been compensated for all the years he spent in prison, at least not yet."

Former Sheriff Nat Glover talked to the PD's office before Dillon. He urged the attorneys and staff to remember that their clients are more than a case file.

"All of the numbered cases have people attached to them," said Glover. "They have families and real situations. Do not take them lightly.

"If you believe in your heart it's the right thing to do, chances are it's the right thing to do."

msharkey@baileypub.com

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