

TESTIMONY BY RANDY STEIDL FOR THE MARYLAND COMMISSION ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Good afternoon. My name is Randy Steidl. I come from a small farming community in southern Illinois. From the age of 12, I had always worked hard. I worked hard and played hard, but I had never been in serious trouble with the law. In 1986, a friend of mine, Herbert Whitlock, and I were questioned about the murders of two newlyweds. Their names were Dyke and Karen Rhoads. I dismissed this as simply an attempt by police to question a number of people in the area. I didn't know either of the victims, but I cooperated fully with the police. I provided a corroborated alibi for the night of the murders. To my shock, Herbert and I were arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death within 90 days. I had inadequate legal representation, and there was no DNA evidence against me.

Witnesses fabricated testimony against me due to misconduct by local police and prosecutors. I spent the next 12 years on death row trying to prove my innocence. Finally, in 1999, I was able to get a new sentencing hearing, which resulted in a sentence of life without parole. I continued to fight for my freedom for almost five more years. In 2000, an Illinois State Police investigation of four years proved that local police and prosecutors had framed me and Herbert, resulting in our wrongful convictions. The real person responsible for the murder was Karen Rhoads' employer, a man who had made major campaign contributions to the governor's office. This made the case too "politically sensitive," so that the governor ordered the investigation against him to be ceased.

In 2003, a federal judge overturned my conviction and ordered a new trial. Judge McCuskey stated that if all the evidence that should have been investigated had been presented at trial it was "reasonably probable" that I would have been acquitted by the jury. The state reinvestigated the case, tested DNA evidence, and found no link to me. The State Attorney General decided not to appeal the ruling and county prosecutors decided not to retry the case. On May 28, 2004, after a total of 17 years, three months and three weeks of wrongful imprisonment, I left prison. I was escorted by my wife, Patty; my mother, Bobbie; and my brother, Rory, who was an

Illinois state policeman for 25 years. My faith in God and the constant support of my family enabled me to be strong and not to let the system turn me into what they think I am or wanted me to be while I was in prison.

I was the 18th person to be freed because of a wrongful conviction after serving time on the state's death row since Illinois reinstated the death penalty in 1977. Since my release, I've been adjusting to my new life and working in the manufacturing business. But I can't make up for the more than 17 years I lost not being able to see my family outside of the confines of a prison, not being able to watch my children grow up, not being able to be a productive member of society. All for something I didn't do. And all for political reasons.

We've heard a lot about statistics today but I am here to tell you that the people who have been exonerated and released from death rows across the United States aren't just statistics. They're human beings, human beings who had hopes and dreams, just like all Americans. Some of them are in this room with you today. I'm one of them and I hope my story helps put a face on the statistics..

Thank you very much for taking the time to listen to my story today.

Testimony submitted by Randy Steidl, Charleston, Illinois

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