

# The inevitability of error: experiences from former death row exonerees



**Kwame Kamau Ajamu** (formerly known as Ronnie Bridgeman) is fifty-eight years old and resides in Richfield Ohio with LaShawn, his wife of twelve years. He was wrongfully convicted and spent twenty-eight years in prison - three of which were on death row - for the murder of a money order salesman in Cleveland Ohio in 1975, and was exonerated in December of 2014. Kwame hopes that no one else has to endure what he has

endured. Since his exoneration Kwame has become solely focused on abolishing the death penalty all over the world, and he has devoted his time and energy going across the United States speaking against the death penalty. Kwame joined the WTI board in August 2016.



**John Thompson** spent 18 years in prison for a robbery and murder he did not commit, 14 of them on death row in solitary confinement in the infamous Angola prison in Louisiana. He was exonerated after evidence covered up by New Orleans prosecutors surfaced after his seventh and final execution date was issued for May 20, 1999. John was arrested in 1985 in New Orleans for the murder Liuzza, a hotel executive from a prominent family, convicted, and sent to death row at Angola prison. He was arrested based

on the false testimony of Kevin Freeman, who had sold the victim's ring and the gun used in the murder to John, but implicated him the murder. This, coupled with an accusation that John had been involved in an earlier robbery, got him a death sentence. John then retained on appeal pro bono lawyers Michael Banks and Gordon Cooney, from the Philadelphia blue-chip law firm of Morgan Lewis. By 1999, they had exhausted all appeals. Amazingly, an investigator they had hired looked through the evidence one last time found a report sent to the prosecutors 15 years prior and suppressed by them that refuted that John's blood type matched that of the earlier robbery, as well as the names of witnesses and police reports that cast severe doubt on the prosecution's case – 10 pieces in all. Thus, the robbery conviction was thrown out, and a retrial was ordered on the murder case. In 2003, a jury took only 35 minutes to acquit John.



**Shujaa Graham** was framed for the 1973 murder of a prison guard at the Deuel Vocational Institute in Stockton, California, and was sent to San Quentin's death row. Because the district attorney had systematically excluded all African-American jurors, the California Supreme Court overturned his death sentence in 1979. Yet it wasn't until 1981 that he was found innocent and released from prison. Rather than being protected by the United States' criminal justice system, Shujaa often points out that he won his

freedom and affirmed his innocence "in spite of the system."

Shujaa lives in Takoma Park, Maryland, with his partner, Phyllis Prentice, and both are active members of Witness to Innocence's Board of Directors. Shujaa gives lectures on the death penalty, the criminal justice system, racism, and gang violence to people around the world. Not surprisingly, one of Shujaa's favorite audiences is American youth. "I'm filled with ideals for a better future," he says. "I may never enjoy the fruits of this labor, but our children will."



**Debra Milke** was wrongfully convicted in 1990 of a horrible crime against her own child, Christopher, who was brutally murdered. She spent 22 years on Arizona's death row. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals granted her Habeas Corpus Petition in 2013, holding that prosecutors failed to disclose a history of misconduct by homicide detective Armando Saldate Jr. While she did gain her hard-fought-for freedom, she was still left with a life without her son, making the victory bittersweet. She remains in her hometown of Phoenix, where she works part-time at a law firm, and tries to rebuild

the shattered life.



**Lawyer Johnson** was sentenced to death by an all-white male jury for the murder of a white victim. He spent 10 years on Walpole State Prison's death row for a crime he did not commit. Lawyer was the last person sentenced to die in Massachusetts before the Commonwealth abolished capital punishment in 1974. In his initial trial the prosecution's case rested on then 18 year old Kenneth Myers' testimony. 10 years later, Myers eventually

admitted to defense investigators that he lied about Johnson's role. A court judge ordered the state to either retry or set Johnson free. The prosecutor dropped the charges and he was set free. Lawyer, an accomplished artist, resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He continues to be an activist for the death penalty abolition movement and for the wrongly convicted.