



**Aging Outside the Walls: Care for Older Adult Exonerated Survivors of Death Row
Grant Report to Friends Foundation for the Aging
March 2021**

Witness to Innocence (WTI) received grant funding of \$25,000 from Friends Foundation for the Aging in the spring of 2020 to assist our DREAMS program (Death Row Exonerated Assistance, Mentoring, and Support) in providing social work support for older adult exonerated death row survivors (exonerees). The project set out to alleviate the suffering of exonerees over 60 years of age who were tortured through wrongful incarceration on death row. The original intention of the project was that a dedicated social worker would be hired to provide case management and referral services and to develop resources and partnerships to support older adult exonerees' access to medical, dental, and mental health care, housing and social welfare services.

The plan was for the Older Adult Social Worker to be hired during late spring to begin during the summer of 2020. They would work as part of the DREAMS project team, collaborating with the Director of Social Work (Cara Kovalovich) and three peer specialists who provide consistent, ongoing peer support to address the psychological and mental health needs of the exonerees. The Older Adult Social Worker was to focus on the exonerees who are over 60 years of age.

In mid-March, due to the pandemic-related shutdowns, WTI's office at Friends Center closed and staff were working remotely. At the time, we expected this might last a few weeks or so, and while we thought our timeline might be a bit delayed, we had no idea for how long the pandemic and shutdowns would last, and how deeply the outbreak and resulting economic crisis would affect our members. By April, the Peer Specialists and Director of Social Work were grappling with unprecedented requests for emergency financial assistance, support connecting to resources, and assistance navigating life during a pandemic. Exonerees who relied on supplemental income from speaking engagements had their events canceled beginning in late February and initially, it took a while before we (and our audiences) made the adaptation to online platforms for events.

Most of the initial emergency funding requests came from our younger exonerees who usually are working but were unemployed or underemployed because of the shutdowns. Our older exonerees were less impacted immediately by the shutdowns, but this had a trickle-down effect in that those who usually don't need as much of the social work team's time were suddenly needing a lot more support. This impacted the time we had for older adults who needed social support because of isolation.

As discussed in our proposal, many WTI exonerees entered prison young and healthy and returned to the outside world years, or even decades later with chronic health problems. The fallout of the pandemic was particularly tough on our vulnerable population. Nearly half were over 60 at the beginning of the grant period. Years of incarceration take a toll on physical and



mental health. Multiple risk factors put almost all of our exonerees at especially high risk for serious complications or death should they contract the virus, especially our oldest members. In addition to health conditions and age, many live in closely packed communities or multigenerational households. All of this was compounded by the high incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as the isolation of quarantine triggered many psychologically, evoking memories of solitary confinement and isolation. The anxiety, stress, and mental health issues many people were dealing with were magnified for WTI death row exonerees.

ACTIONS

The serious impact of the pandemic on WTI members was apparent even before we planned to begin the grant period, but it was well into the summer before it became clear that we would be dealing with these effects for an extended period of time. Staff were focused on solving immediate and urgent requests. The pace of the growing needs of our members escalated along with the pandemic and economic crisis and our work changed very quickly. We did not have adequate the time and resources to move forward with hiring and onboarding someone, as staff were busy with the work necessary to maintain support for the exonerees, and it would have been challenging to train someone new without any ability to meet in person. We initially thought we might just be delayed by a month or so, but eventually it became apparent that another plan would better meet the needs of older adult exonerees. In consultation with the Foundation, in October we agreed upon an alternative plan for the grant funding. Our original budget had called for \$22,500 to hire a part-time social worker, and \$2500 dedicated to increasing Peer Specialist hours to meet the growing needs of our aging population. We shifted instead to moving one Peer Specialist to near full time with a focus on the older adult exonerees, amending the budget to use \$20,000 to increase his time for the remainder of the year so that he worked approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ time or 30 hours/week (an increase from working $\frac{1}{3}$ time). The remaining \$5000 of the funds would be used for technology and training.

WTI Peer Specialist Randal Padgett assumed the role of Older Adult Peer Specialist in October. He had already been especially engaged in assisting his fellow older adult exonerees and helping them connect to resources. His work was crucial in managing the increasing caseload for the social work team during the crisis. Randal speaks with each of the older adults on a weekly or biweekly basis while Cara, the Director of Social Work, takes care of more emergency needs of the younger ones. He was able to assume the responsibility for all the social support for the older adults, freeing Cara to handle immediate housing, money, and access. Randal refers the most pressing emergency needs Cara. They are working together to increase his skills in identifying and developing resources for and managing needs of Older Adult Exonerees. They are developing plans for further training, including the possibility of certification for the State of Alabama, where he lives. Other options are still under consideration such as webinars from the American Society on Aging, the Gerontological Society of America, or professional Social Work organizations and schools such as the NASW, Boston University School of Social Work Center for Aging and Disability Education and Research, and the University of Arkansas Institute of Geriatric Social



Work. As an impacted member of the community both as an exoneree and as an older adult, he has in-depth understanding of the needs of those we serve. He is our longest-serving Peer Specialist, he is experienced with the work and has been incredibly enthusiastic about rising to the many challenges. He looks forward to developing further social work skills. As an added benefit, he lives in close proximity to many exonerees who live in the south, enhancing localization of our work, especially once travel in person is possible again.

Now that we have had this model in place, it is clear that it is a positive, sustainable approach to our program. It is in keeping with our efforts to continue to uplift exoneree leadership and peer support in our organization. Surviving death row is a unique experience and presents additional challenges to the aging process, including issues with trust that our Peer Specialists can overcome in ways that most others cannot. Our intention is to continue the Older Adult Peer Specialty at 100% full time. In addition to increasing peer support, this year (through other sources of funding) WTI provided 42 \$1000 COVID relief grants to exonerees. In addition, we increased the amount of Emergency Funds available to each exoneree to \$1500. In 2020, the organization provided 42 Emergency Fund payments for vital needs such as housing, utilities, transportation and medical services. Emergency Fund disbursements ranged from \$50 to \$1500 and supported 18 exonerees, totaling \$20,900 in Emergency Fund payments, in addition to the \$42,000 provided in COVID relief grants. The COVID relief grants helped to reduce the need for other emergency funds in some cases, and in other cases provided badly needed aid beyond the \$1500 limit on emergency funds per person. All told, financial support to exonerees more than tripled the usual annual amount in the first 6 months of 2020 alone.

In addition to the COVID grants and emergency funds provided, WTI increased honoraria so that it would more closely match income received in traveling for multi-day speaking. We quickly pivoted to online events so that exonerees could continue their work as advocates against the death penalty and for criminal justice reform. The financial support allowed people to stay safe, including maintaining housing despite massive job loss. While the circumstances of the pandemic increased mental health risks, the supports we provided helped to mitigate negative mental health outcomes. By providing people with technology and internet, teaching them how to use it, and increasing their time spent with peer specialists, we were able to reduce their risk of mental health issues. As we are still in the process of recovery, we will continue to provide enhanced supports as needed.

WORK WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

WTI was very grateful for Friends Foundations for the Aging's flexibility in allowing us to pivot to a different plan in response to the sudden changes brought on by the pandemic. Other funders, such as the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, and SC Ministry Foundation, removed restrictions on our travel funds and allowed us to use that money for direct exoneree support. Art for Justice, an organization we are working with on a film and communications project, provided two additional grants for COVID relief funds for exonerees.



The DREAMS project team also worked throughout the year with the following organizations:

- After Innocence, San Francisco, California for Legal Assistance/Health Insurance Services.
- Riverside Recovery of Tampa, Tampa, Florida: Addictions/Recovery Services.
- Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio: Medical/Psychiatric Services.
- Memphis Legal Services, Memphis, Tennessee: Legal Assistance Services.
- Narcotics Anonymous, Virginia Beach, Virginia: Addictions/Recovery.
- University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana: Tutoring/Transcription Services.
- Innocence Project Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii: Legal Services.
- Dr. William Petty, PhD of Austin, Texas: Mental Health Services.
- Dr. Timothy Vermillion, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Trauma-informed EMDR Therapy.
- The Sunny Center, Tampa, FL: Housing, Case Management and Social Support.

OUTPUTS

WTI provided approximately 993 units of contact and 24 units of service during the grant period, serving 46 death row exonerees and their loved ones. The Older Adult Peer Specialist provided weekly, biweekly, or monthly contact with 19 older adult exonerees, based on their personal preference for contact and needs. In response to the economic crisis, we increased the hours for the other two Peer Specialists, in addition to the increase to full time hours for the Older Adult Peer Specialist.

The Director of Social Work and Peer Specialists have been unable to travel to meet exonerees, including new death row exonerees in person. They have maintained contact through phone calls, texts, email, and video conferencing. Equipping older exonerees with technology and Wi-Fi access, and training them to use it, has taken time and we are still working to connect more of our members. Not only does this provide vital access to the community, but it has allowed them to connect more with family and friends as well during times that may otherwise be quite lonely. Because of travel restrictions and to protect the health and safety of our members, we postponed and then ultimately cancelled the 2020 Annual Gathering. The Gathering is an important opportunity for new exonerees to connect with their peers who share the unique experience of having been wrongfully incarcerated and facing execution on death row. In addition to contact with individuals, the Peer Specialists and Director of Social Work host monthly town hall calls to provide members with a sense of community, support and to provide vital information.

Below are details about the types of assistance provided by the Social Work Team:

Medical

While medical assistance is 100% referral based, the Peer Specialists and the Director of Social Work spent an extraordinary amount of time during the implementation period supporting exonerees with information about staying safe during the COVID-19 pandemic and accessing testing and vaccines. The Director of Social Work responded to one non-COVID related request



from an older exonerated death row survivor for financial assistance for dental care, which was supported by the Emergency Fund. There were fewer requests to the Emergency Fund for medical needs this year, likely because people were using their funds for more urgent housing, utilities and transportation needs. The increase of the Older Adult Peer Specialist's hours and focus of his job on care of older exonerees allowed for more time to support the growing needs of older death row survivors. Most of this attention to their medical needs during the implementation period was focused on COVID related issues, such as safety protocols, testing and more recently, helping the navigate signing up for vaccines. Medical support issues represented about 40% of the activities of the project.

Psychological

WTI provides referrals to other psychological or psychiatric services. Psychological assistance is 99% referral based. The Peer Specialists and Director of Social Work responded to a request for drug and alcohol treatment which we provided a referral to through a local partner. This year the focus was very heavily on financial, social, and medical concerns and less about formal psychological treatment because of the immediate emergencies brought on by the pandemic. The new role of the Older Adult Peer Specialist focused on older adult care that was added during the grant period will assist the Director of Social Work in cultivating resources. Most importantly, the Older Adult Peer Specialist helps to reduce stigma and encourages their peers to access psychological care. Overall, support for psychological needs represented about 10% of the activities of the project.

Social

The WTI social work team provided vital connections for exonerees who were isolated by the pandemic. A significant amount of time was spent in the implementation period helping exonerees to access and maintain basic needs such as housing, utilities, transportation, and food. The WTI DREAMS project delivered case management, information and referral, and peer support services to 46 exonerated death row survivors, 21 over 60 years old, including connecting with 2 new exonerees, one of whom is also over 60. Since exonerated death row survivors live in communities located across the United States and travel was not possible, the WTI Director of Social Work and Peer Specialists used phone calls, texts, social media messaging and emails to communicate with exonerees. Exonerees were provided with training, support, internet access and equipment so that they could use ZOOM and web based platforms to communicate. With the increase in hours for all Peer Specialists we were able to provide 993 units of contact from the Social Work Team, and a combined total of at least 35 hours per week of direct contact with exonerated death row survivors during the grant period. (A unit of contact is any instance of meaningful communication with an exonerated death row survivor that is made by the Social Worker or Peer Specialists via usual communication methods or in-person and is ten minutes or more) In addition, the Director of Social Work delivered approximately 24 units of service that involved addressing significant economic, medical, mental health, education, social, and other life challenges faced by service participants. (Units of service are comprised of multiple units of contact and are used to track long-term, in-depth case management.) The social work team helped service participants to obtain government financial and health insurance benefits, to



access legal assistance, to maintain housing stability, and to meet other basic needs. The Director of Social Work and Peer Specialists were unable to provide in-person support and in person events where exonerated death row survivors would gather together for peer support and leadership development training were cancelled. Monthly town hall calls, participation in the biweekly Cruel Justice Facebook Live events, and individual communications with Peer Specialists helped to maintain a sense of community support. While social services are the core of all the work of the project, services to exonerees for social needs represented about 30% of the project.

Legal

Legal assistance is 100% referral based. The Peer Specialists and Director of Social Work respond to requests from exonerees for assistance in accessing legal help. The Social Worker provides appropriate referrals, supported by the emergency fund as needed upon request when funds allow. Legal referrals normally represent significantly less than 5% of the activities the project. In 2020, legal referrals were provided for an ongoing issue with social security, representing about 2% of the activities of the project.

Financial

The WTI Director of Social Work, Peer Specialists, Executive Director, Emergency Fund Committee, Development and other support staff were all engaged with helping exonerees maintain financial stability during the implementation period. As previously described, the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic was particularly hard on many of WTI's death row exonerees. The Emergency Fund provides a limited amount of temporary and immediate assistance such as helping with rent, utility bills, medical and dental needs. To help mitigate the financial hardship exonerees experienced during the pandemic shutdowns, the board increased the amount available to each exoneree in emergency funds to \$1500 for the year. The Development Department provided outreach to supporters via social media and email blasts in targeted campaigns to raise funds for direct exoneree financial support. Several of our funders, including UNVFVT, allowed unspent travel funds to be used for urgent exoneree needs such as for food and housing. The WTI board moved to provide no-strings-attached grants of \$1000 each to exonerees for emergency COVID relief. In 2020, WTI provided approximately \$63,000 in direct exoneree financial support, triple our budgeted amount. 42 exonerated death row exonerees and their family members benefitted from this support, receiving a minimum of \$1000 each. Support for financial needs represented about 18% of the project.

Outcomes and Impact

The biggest outcome during the grant period was an unexpected one. The education and social support we were able to provide with the increased hours and focus on older adults minimized the potential harmful psychological outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WITNESS TO INNOCENCE

Older adult death row exonerees who received services from the WTI Older Adult Peer Specialist and Director of Social Work were able to successfully address the challenges and/or resolve the problems for which they requested assistance – it was just that most of the problems were not what we would normally have expected and were often short term rather than long term. As more and more folks are vaccinated and more normalcy resumes, we will focus once again on more long-term solutions for addressing and resolving challenges. Further, the decision to increase the time and responsibilities of a Peer Specialist rather than hiring an additional Social Worker turned out to be a great fit for the needs of the exonerees, even if it was not what we originally had planned. We plan to continue this model and to replicate it with a Family Peer Specialist in 2022, who will focus on the unique needs of exoneree family members and provide peer support and programs. Hopefully, we will soon be in less of a crisis mode and WTI can focus more on developing protocols and identifying best practices for the care of older adults who were formerly incarcerated and sharing those with other organizations. This program, with the new development of the Older Adult Peer Specialist model, has the potential to become a model that can benefit thousands older adult returning citizens through replication.

Because we were able to manage the support exonerees needed during this difficult last year, older adult exonerated death row survivors remained active in the abolition movement and continued their work to abolish the death penalty (and learned how to do so online!). This was possible because the DREAMS program provided the stability and consistent care they need. Thus, we also indirectly supported the 2500 prison inmates on death row facing execution, some of whom are likely innocent. We are so incredibly grateful for the support from Friends Foundation for the Aging that helps make this possible.

A budget update is attached showing the actual expenditures for the project. We will be requesting funding from Friends Foundation for the Aging for next year, to continue supporting our older adults and growing our capacity to serve them and to develop an excellent model for care that can be replicated. We look forward to sharing more in our proposal.

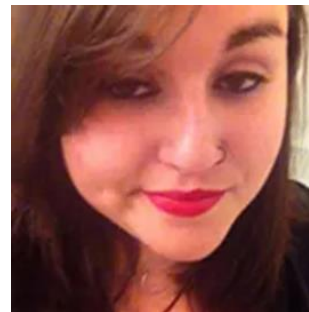
Thank you, on behalf of the death row exonerees of Witness to Innocence,



Kirk Bloodsworth, Executive Director Exoneree

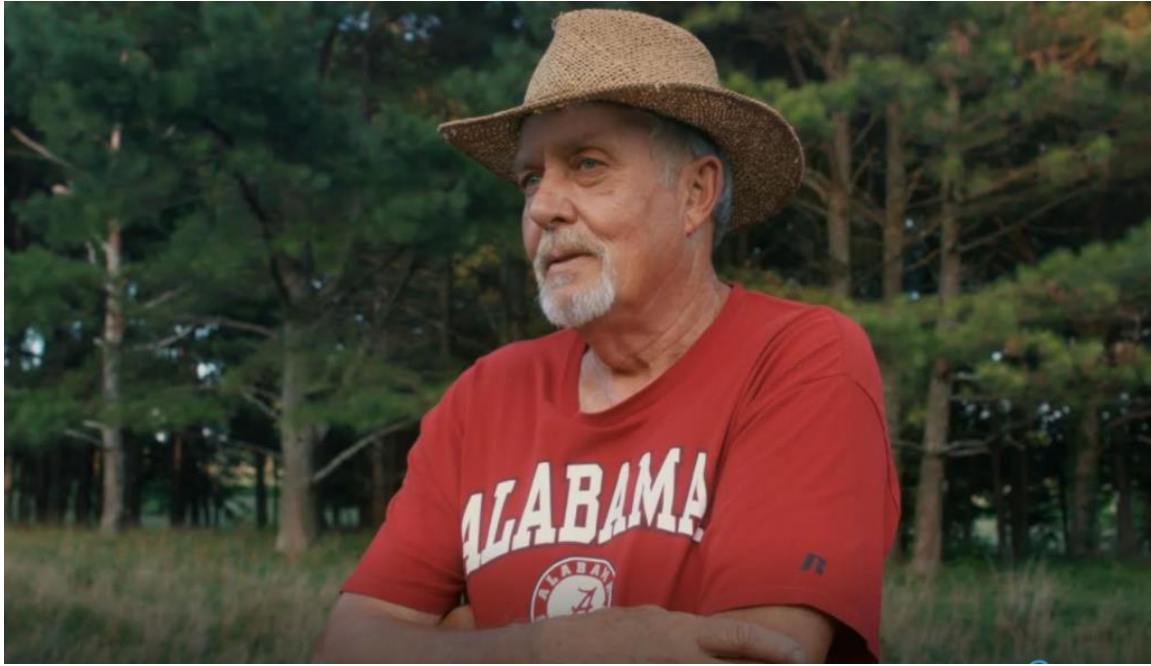


Randal Padgett, Older Adult Peer Specialist Exoneree



Cara Kovalovich, Director of Social Work

WITNESS TO INNOCENCE



Randal Padgett, WTI's Older Adult Peer Specialist, at home in Alabama. Randal spent three years on Alabama's death row and another two years in prison for a crime he did not commit before being exonerated in 1997.

Today, Randal lives in Alabama with his wife Brenda, who supported him during his fight for freedom. He credits his strong religious faith in sustaining him through his ordeal, and loves speaking to college students and communities of faith. He is driven by quiet dignity and determined passion to see the death penalty abolished in the country he loves. He is devoted to his work caring for and supporting his peers.

WITNESS TO INNOCENCE



Derrick Jamison, WTI Peer Specialist, spent 20 years on Ohio's death row for a crime he did not commit. He now works for Witness to Innocence as a Peer Specialist, supporting his fellow exonerated death row survivors as they navigate life after exoneration and continue their fight for abolition. Derrick is devoted to the work of ending the death penalty, not only for the wrongfully incarcerated, but because he believes it is wrong to kill any human being.

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Shujaa Graham, WTI Peer Specialist/Organizer, at home with his son. Shujaa and other WTI exonerees are featured in the March 2021 issue of National Geographic. The full article can be accessed here: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/sentenced-to-death-but-innocent-these-are-stories-of-justice-gone-wrong>

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WTI Board Chair Kwame Ajamu was a teenager in Cleveland, Ohio, when he became a victim of wrongful conviction due to false eyewitness testimony and police misconduct, resulting in 28 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

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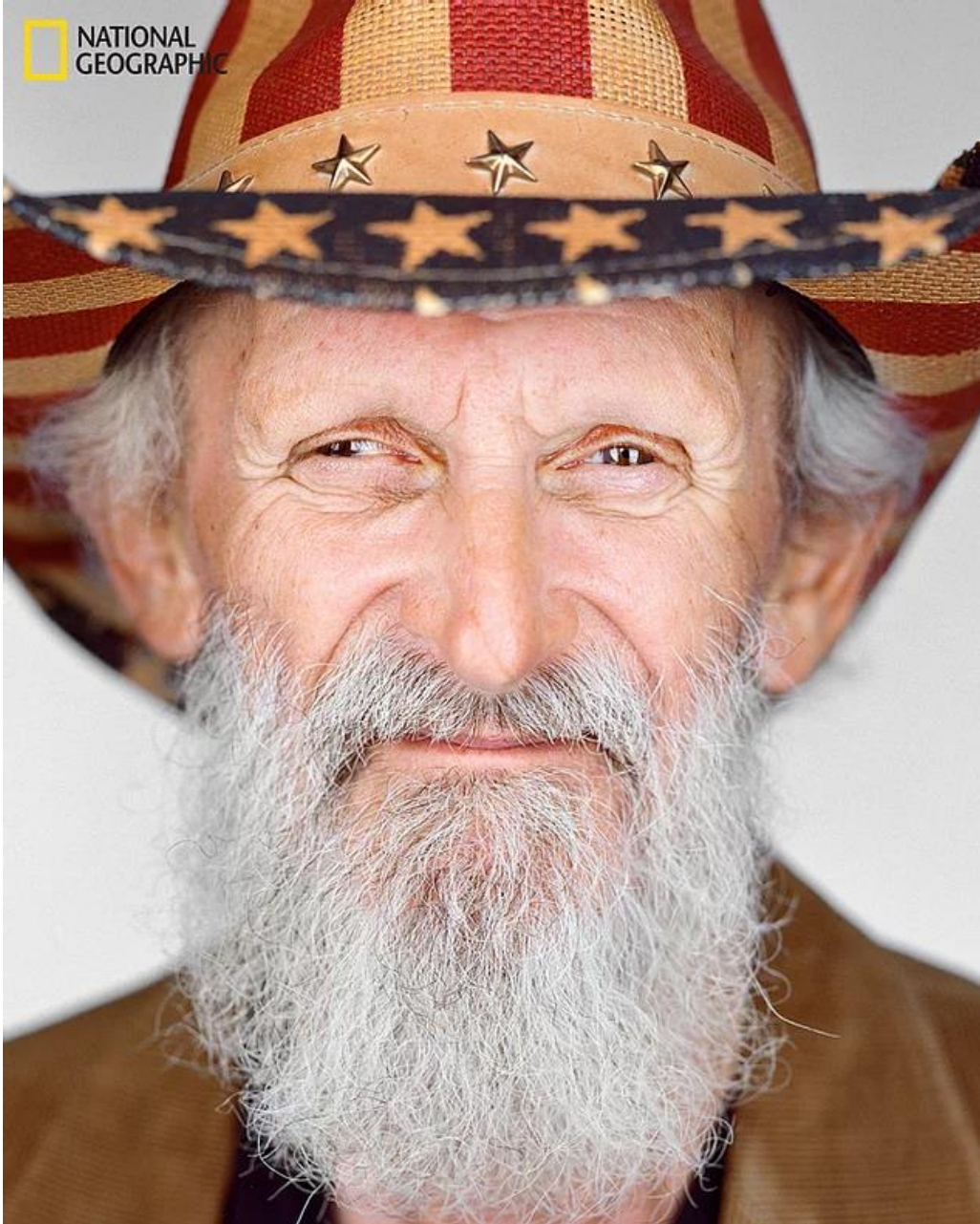
WITNESS TO INNOCENCE



*Mr. Perry Cobb, Poet, WTI Exoneree, Featured in March 2021 National Geographic.
Perry has also served WTI as a Peer Specialist.*

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Death-row exoneree Albert Burrell came within 17 days of execution in Alabama. Albert is featured in the March 2021 National Geographic. Like his peers, Albert shares his story of wrongful conviction, incarceration on death row, and exoneration with audiences throughout the US in an effort to abolish the death penalty.

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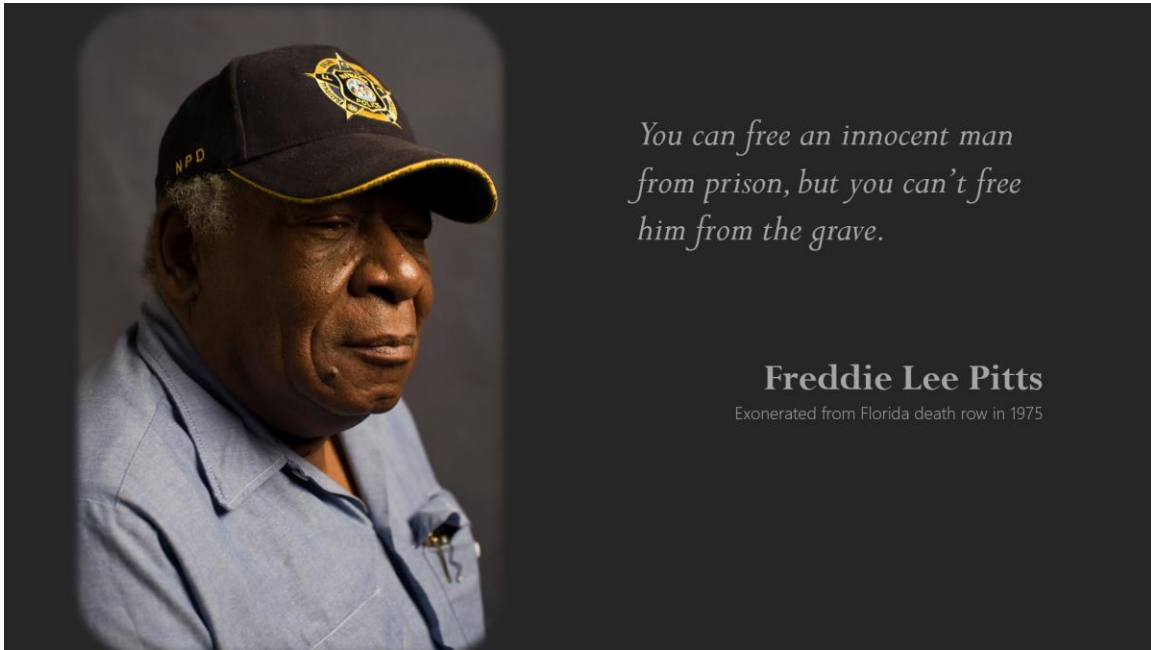
WITNESS TO INNOCENCE



WTI Exoneree Lawyer Johnson with Mahalia Tibbs, daughter of the late Delbert Tibbs, an exonerated death row survivor. Family members of WTI exonerees are a vital part of our community. Among WTI's goals for 2022 is a plan to launch a new support program for family members coordinated by a Family Peer Specialist.

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WITNESS TO INNOCENCE



*You can free an innocent man
from prison, but you can't free
him from the grave.*

Freddie Lee Pitts

Exonerated from Florida death row in 1975

Our beloved Freddie Lee Pitts passed away in 2020. Before he did, he was able to stay connected with his fellow death row exonerees from his care facility via WTI Town Hall Calls.