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Oregon Innocence Network helps free wrongly convicted

The group of University law and journalism students investigates cases of convicts who claim innocence

BY GABE BRADLEY
NEWS EDITOR

Until recently, Oregon was one of only two states in the country that didn't have a non-profit organization dedicated to helping wrongly convicted inmates prove their innocence.

That began to change a year and a half ago, when Cheri Brooks was a second-year law student at the University.

"I was working for a lawyer — a defense lawyer in town," Brooks said. "He asked me if there was an innocence project at the U of O."

When Brooks looked into the question, she found out that not only was there no innocence project at the University, there was no innocence project whatsoever in Oregon.

"We kind of thought there should be," Brooks said.

Then Brooks and a group of students began trying to drum up interest in the project.

"It's the perfect type of thing for law students because it's an area that practicing attorneys aren't really working on," Brooks said. "People who are in prison and who have been convicted are just pretty much forgotten."

The Oregon Innocence Network was up and running six months after the idea was conceived, and it is now a student group recognized by the ASUO. It includes both law students and journalism students.

"Journalism students because of their investigative techniques can do some substantively helpful things,"

Brooks said.

Brooks said journalism students have played a critical role in overturning wrongful conviction in Illinois' innocence project.

In the past, students have had the chance to work for OIN for credit through the law school. However, this fall there will not be a class offered, though students are still encouraged to volunteer.

"As soon as we started publicizing this thing ... letters started pouring in, you know, from inmates," Brooks said. "OIN is going to continue to work on cases on a volunteer basis."

Brooks, who graduated this year, is leaving Oregon to work as a public defender in Philadelphia.

"That's what I wanted to do; that's why I went to law school," Brooks said. "I see this as a part of that."

She said she hopes OIN will continue to take root in both the law school and the journalism school.

Brooks said one of the hardest parts of the process is evaluating and investigating the many claims that come in to determine which ones are provable.

"It just takes a lot of resources and a lot of time," Brooks said. "The second step is trying to prove it, which is really difficult. So it's an uphill battle."

Brooks said there is an urgent need for someone to do this work and help innocent people go free.

"I think there are some inmates who claim innocence and are getting their paperwork and their files passed around."

Currently, the biggest struggle facing OIN is a lack of resources, according to Brooks.

"Students who want to see this happen need support," Brooks said.

OIN lacks the funds to fully cover the costs of investigating the number of claims coming in.

"Eventually we're hoping to have some sponsorship," Brooks said. "We're hoping this is something the community will support and see the need for."

Law professor and OIN faculty advisor Joe Metcalfe said his role in OIN is primarily involved in evaluating claims to make sure they meet the OIN criteria for further investigation. Part of this involves making sure the cases are in the right place in post-appellate process.

Also, OIN only takes cases where the defendants are claiming factual innocence, not cases where the defendants could get off on a technicality.

"We're not simply another route to appeal a conviction," Metcalfe said.

Metcalfe said the experience offered by OIN can be valuable to many students. They get the opportunity to see how trials work and some of the failings in the criminal justice system.

Students interested in prosecution, defense or any kind of trial work can benefit from being involved in OIN, said Metcalfe.

"Everybody understands that having an innocent person in jail serves no one's interest," Metcalfe said. "We have had a lot of student interest. I've been very pleased."

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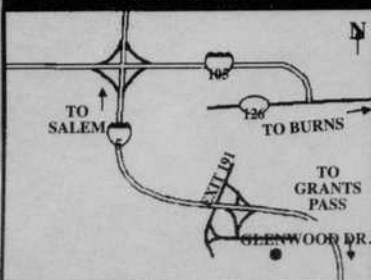
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