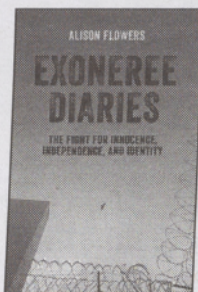


Exonerated but not free

Journalist Alison Flowers follows four exonerees whose lost opportunities and struggles to rebuild their lives left them feeling trapped even after their release from prison



"Exoneree Diaries: The Fight for Innocence, Independence, and Identity" by Alison Flowers

BY KATHERINE LUCK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

More than 2.3 million people are being held in state and federal correctional facilities across the U.S. Within such a massive population, chances are more than a few are actually innocent. As investigative journalist Alison Flowers discovered, an estimated 2 to 5 percent of all prisoners in the U.S. did not commit the crimes they've been accused of and a prisoner is found innocent and formally exonerated every three days.

Flowers explores the lives of four wrongfully convicted prisoners, chronicling their experiences before, during and after exoneration in "Exoneree Diaries: The Fight for Innocence, Independence, and Identity."

Although life within the prison system is increasingly coming under scrutiny, the struggle of former prisoners who have been released is often glossed over.

"Little is known about how exonerated prisoners struggle to rebuild the lives and the livelihoods they lost," Flowers wrote.

Flowers began to examine the exoneree experience in 2013, stemming from investigations into corruption within the Chicago Police Department. She found that the impact of imprisonment is long lasting and the release of an innocent person is not necessarily a joyous victory of justice.

After their release, many former prisoners struggle for years to get the false status of felon removed from their records so that they can obtain housing and employment. James, one of the exonerees

Flower profiles, was even informed that his false conviction for arson and murder was his fault, as he had "set in motion the investigation in 1988 that led to his conviction by reporting car fires in 1987, which caused him to come to the attention of the police." In essence, by being a good citizen, James had somehow orchestrated his own false conviction.

After a quarter of a century behind bars, James found himself facing a future on the outside that was in its own way as bereft of freedom as his life in prison. Although he was grateful to be exonerated, he felt trapped by dreams of the life he could have led.

"I have no doubt that my life would be totally different. I would have a very successful business by now. I'd be looking towards retirement with great anticipation. Now, it's extreme horror because I haven't been able to pay Social Security taxes for the last 25 years. I haven't been able to plan a retirement," he said.

"Some exonerees die before receiving a dime of compensation," Flowers noted, with many facing expensive and lifelong health complications from inadequate medical care while in prison. They also lose touch with family and friends, often missing out on social and emotional milestones such as completing their schooling, learning to drive, raising a family and finding meaningful work.

Perhaps the most tragic case is that of Kristine, a young mother who woke up one night to find her trailer home on fire. Her

young son died in the blaze. Kristine was promptly arrested for arson.

Her attorney, Jane Raley, recalled, "Here we had a woman with no prior criminal history. No eyewitness. No confession. No motive. And the experts we were consulting were telling us there was no scientific basis to suggest arson."

Kristine was found guilty and sentenced to 60 years in prison. After 17 years behind bars, she was exonerated. Although she was gradually able to piece her life back together, reconnecting with her family and establishing an independent life on the outside, she missed her chance to do the one thing she most longed to do: have another child.

"Exoneree Diaries" grew from a yearlong online series by Chicago Public Media, with three of the former criminals drawn from "the wrongful conviction capital of the United States: Cook County, Illinois," a county that averages the most exonerations of any in the country. Together, the four individuals profiled in "Exoneree Diaries" served more than 80 years for crimes they did not commit.

Although bleak at times, the perseverance of the former prisoners and their determination to prove their innocence is inspiring. The exonerees might hesitate to claim their stories have "happy endings," but they can say that after years of struggle, justice has finally been served.

Reprinted from Street Roots' sister paper, Real Change News, Seattle