

Until proven innocent

Anna Vasquez is one of the San Antonio Four – LGBT Latinas imprisoned for more than a decade for a horrific crime that never occurred. Now exonerated, Vasquez is working to protect others from wrongful conviction.

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Anna Vasquez and three of her friends – Elizabeth Ramirez, Cassandra Rivera, and Kristie Mayhugh – spent more than a decade of their lives as convicted sex offenders for a crime that never happened. In 1997 and 1998, the quad was accused of performing drug-fueled, satanic ritualistic child rape at gunpoint.

The four Latina women, who had recently come out as lesbian to their families and friends, were found guilty of a molesting two young girls, the nieces of one of the women.

Suddenly, instead of planning their own futures, the four found themselves isolated in separate state prisons, registered as sex offenders and serving time for a crime of which they were innocent.

In 2012, filming began on a documentary about the San Antonio Four, “Southwest of Salem,” in which one of the child accusers recanted her testimony. Vasquez was released on parole later that year. The other three women were released on bond in 2013, after Texas lawmakers passed a “junk science” bill allowing defendants to bring a writ of habeas corpus on grounds that scientific evidence is later deemed faulty.

The four women fought to prove their innocence with the help of their families and friends, of course, but largely it was the dedicated staff of the Texas Innocence Project, lead attorney Mike Ware and “Southwest of Salem” filmmaker Deborah Esquenazi who collaborated tirelessly with them to prove their innocence.

In 2016, their fight paid off. “Southwest of Salem” won numerous awards, accuser Stephanie Limon once again recanted her testimony, and another key piece of medical “junk” evidence came to light. The San Antonio Four received 25,000 signatures on a Change.org petition to support the reversal of their charges, and in November 2016, the court did just that: It granted exoneration to all four women.

When we spoke, Vasquez was very clear about the importance of other people believing in the quest for truth and justice. This is largely the only reason that all four of these women are not still

registered sex offenders or languishing in a prison cell for a crime that never happened – that to a few people, the facts just didn’t add up, and they didn’t let it go. They fought to the end to find the truth. The results of that determination will reverberate through the rest of the lives of these four women.

Vasquez and Rivera will be in Portland on May 11, speaking at an Oregon Innocence Project fundraising event at Urban Studio.

I spoke with Vasquez by phone the day after Lendell Lee was executed in Arkansas. His was the first in a series of executions in Arkansas’ effort to use up its remaining doses of midazolam, which would soon expire and are increasingly hard to acquire because pharmaceutical companies don’t want their drugs used in executions. Initially eight inmates were scheduled to die over 11 days – the fastest pace of executions in decades. Some executions were blocked by the courts.

Lee was convicted of the 1995 murder of Debra Reese. The Innocence Project and the ACLU petitioned on Lee’s behalf for a stay of execution and a re-testing of the DNA evidence in his case, but their petition was denied. Lee was executed April 20. I asked Vasquez what she thought about that.

Anna Vasquez: They didn’t even give him a shot to test the DNA. What if it comes out that he was innocent? And they put this man to death? That is completely unfair. Why wouldn’t you test the DNA? How can those people sleep at night? Don’t they have a conscience? (Giving him his fair day in court) was the right thing to do to, but they didn’t do that.

Suzanne Zalokar: You have been out of prison on parole since 2012. It looks like you have been doing lots of social justice work. Tell me about your life now.

A.V.: I work for the Innocence Project of Texas. I am an education and outreach director. One of the projects I am working on is to gather all of the exonerees and organize the community in such a way that when we need someone to speak to a similar or specific situation to help influence the passing of important legislation by having an Innocence Project

exoneree testify to a community, in a courtroom or on the Senate floor. It’s a slow process and is still in the works.

S.Z.: So you’re working on legislation.

A.V.: I was there when Michael Morton and Chris Ochoa (both Innocence Project exonerees) spoke on Texas House Bill 34. That was in regard to making interrogations recorded – actually mandating that. There are many jurisdictions that do this already, but it isn’t mandated. So they were testifying for that. Cassie, Liz and I were there in favor of the bill, as well.

S.Z.: All four of you – the San Antonio Four – were exonerated of all charges in November. That must still be settling in? How does that feel?

A.V.: It’s ironic that you ask that. This might sound kind of weird. I didn’t know how to feel. For 19 years of my life, I was carefree. I was young, not a care in the world but what style is in or my friends were coming over or whatever. After that, for the last 22 years, until Nov. 23 of last year, I had dealt with this accusation on my shoulders. I had actually dealt with it a lot longer than the time I (had not).

When we were actually exonerated, of course, it felt like a weight was lifted. I felt like I could finally breathe for the first time in a long time. After a couple of days ... it was exoneration and then it was Thanksgiving, and then there was a break before Christmas, and I kind of had a breakdown. I felt like, I spent so much time fighting for my innocence, what the hell am I supposed to do now?

I had always wanted to work with the Innocence Project. An opportunity came available, and they asked me to come on board. It was a no-brainer for me.

S.Z.: You are living in San Antonio now. Are there any challenges that you face living in the same community where for so many years you were believed to be guilty of a horrendous crime?

A.V.: When I paroled, I was able to come home to my family home – the only home I’d ever known. I was able to come home and be with mom. The neighbors here are still the neighbors that were the neighbors when I left, except for a couple of them.

I didn’t get any backlash. At all. I actually thought I would because it was so publicized. I tried to keep that going because I still had three friends behind bars. I was advocating for them, but even throughout that whole year when I was by myself doing that, it never happened. Not once.



“Southwest of Salem” is a documentary about the San Antonio Four and the persecution these wrongfully convicted women faced.

PHOTO COURTESY OF “SOUTHWEST OF SALEM”

I always wondered, is somebody going to throw a brick through my window or slash my tires? But I never thought someone might want to hurt me because of my charges.

It was difficult to find a job though.

S.Z.: Ah, yes. Do you want to talk about that awhile?

A.V.: Trying to obtain a job out here was very difficult. And to be not only paroled, but also a registered sex offender. ...

Truth be told, I understand the concern for the community and trying to keep children safe, but it really sucks when you are (a registered sex offender) and you are innocent and you have to abide by that.

It was really difficult. As you know, technology has changed. Before I went to prison, I could walk into a place of business and ask them for a job application and fill it out – possibly be interviewed right then and there.

It doesn’t work like that anymore. You have to do everything on a computer. Being a sex offender, you can’t have access to computers. So there was a place that I would have to travel to by bus only – I could not be taken there by my family – I had to travel by bus to go and apply

for jobs that way.

A lot of people won’t hire sex offenders or murderers for that fact because they don’t want the liability. I think they had (paired) potential employers and employees based on the businesses that were friendly to this population. Maybe it was because the jobs didn’t have you work around children, or were basic labor jobs?

S.Z.: Did the four of you stay in touch while in prison?

A.V.: No.

S.Z.: You were in different places, I assume.

A.V.: We were in different places. When we entered into prison – not jail, but prison – the first year and a half, they allowed inmate-to-inmate mail. Shortly after we arrived there, they cut it out. So, there was no contact besides our families.

You know, Mom would travel to every prison just to see everybody. To keep their spirits up, get them out (of their cells), get them some snacks and sodas. It’s uplifting to have a visit with somebody familiar.

S.Z.: I’ll bet.

A.V.: It’s something to look forward to.

S.Z.: Do the four of you have a friendship now that you are all freed and exonerated?

A.V.: Absolutely. I’m not going to tell you we see each other on a daily or even a weekly basis. It’s really hard. Everybody is trying to get back into the routine of living life again – catching up with things that were taken away for so long.

Kassie’s got her daughter and new grandbaby that she never got to spend time with. And everybody has different works schedules. It’s kind of just life, you know?

S.Z.: That’s awesome though – just a normal life. How would your life have been different had you not gone through this experience?

A.V.: I think about it most when I hang out with my childhood friends and I see how they are established. They have good jobs; they were able to go to college. They have homes and children.

I am a very determined person. I know I would have made something with my life. There is no doubt. At the time, I wanted to succeed in the medical profession. I was thinking to start as a registered nurse. That’s what I was focusing on at the time. Who knows? I might have become a doctor.

to go against a child.”

Another project we are working towards (at the Innocence Project of Texas) is talking to jurors who are willing to share their experience: knowing they found us guilty when we were actually innocent.

S.Z.: That’s an interesting angle. Jury duty is a big responsibility.

A.V.: Absolutely. My mom sat in jury rooms before, and she would tell me that the pressure from the group is very difficult if you are one of the ones to stand firm and not go with the crowd – or if people just want to get it over with and go home.

My hope is that by more exonerees sharing their experiences, it will make people who serve in a jury take their responsibility very seriously. It will help jurors to be attentive to things and stand firm if they believe the person is innocent.

S.Z.: What role has media played in your case?

A.V.: In the beginning, they sucked. We were guilty in the media from the start – it was a juicy story. But in the end, I believe (the media) helped to set us free, as well.

Not only the media, but “Southwest of Salem” really shed some light on our humanity. Of course, there was also the refuting of key testimonies.

S.Z.: What does the word justice mean to you?

A.Z.: That’s a good one. I think it means exactly what it was meant to mean: for nobody to use the law to their advantage.

Justice means not to discriminate.

For a long time, I think that has been abused. I think that is why we were so hopeful (during the trial) – because justice is supposed to be in the courts, no matter what is being said about us. No matter what the media was saying about us, we were going to have a good shot in the court system. Unfortunately, it wasn’t like that.

Justice, to me, means to me, giving everyone a fair shot for their day in court.

S.Z.: Surely there are other people sitting in prison, serving time for crimes they did not commit. Some of them might be sitting on death row. What would you say to these folks?

A.V.: Don’t give up hope. I know it is easier said than done. (Sighs.) I feel like I have a right to say that because I was there. I know how difficult it is being in prison. It is very hard and inhumane. Period. It’s a hard place to survive in.

I know that my faith in God carried me a long way. Yes, I had family and I had friends who were out here supporting me, but when you are in prison, you are alone. (God) really is the only one who holds you during your most difficult times.