



TEXAS EXONEREES VISIT PORTLAND TO SUPPORT THE OREGON INNOCENCE PROJECT AND SHARE THEIR REMARKABLE STORY

Anna Vasquez and Cassandra Rivera were recently exonerated after more than a decade in prison.

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PORTLAND, Ore. – Two Texan women who were recently exonerated after spending nearly 15 years in prison for a crime they did not commit will visit Portland next month to support the Oregon Innocence Project (OIP). The project is hosting a fundraising event called THIS IS INNOCENCE on May 11th at which Anna Vasquez and Cassandra Rivera will be the special guests. Oregon Innocence Project is a nonprofit program dedicated to exonerating innocent Oregonians, promoting legal reforms that prevent and address wrongful convictions, and training law students, and is the only project of its kind in Oregon.

Anna Vasquez and Cassandra Rivera are two of four women who became known as the San Antonio Four. They, along with Kristie Mayhugh and Elizabeth Ramirez, were thrust into the national spotlight for the worst possible reason: they had become suspects in the alleged sexual abuse of Ramirez's two young nieces. Although all protested their innocence from the start, they were convicted and sentenced to decades in prison. Inaccurate testimony from a medical expert and a climate of homophobia surrounding the trial helped to convict them. The women's sexuality was used against them during the trial after they had recently come out as gay.

Cut off from their children and families, locked behind bars and regarded as monsters by most, the Four seemed to have no way out. That is until one of the "victims", now an adult, came forward to admit she had lied. She had been coached by family members and used by her father as leverage in a custody battle.

As the story began to fall apart, the women were able to obtain legal assistance and get back into court to clear their names. They were released from prison while their case was reviewed and in November 2016 the Texas Court of Appeals exonerated them.

Vasquez and Rivera will share their story with Oregon Innocence Project supporters at the THIS IS INNOCENCE benefit on May 11th in Portland. At the event, Legal Director Steve Wax will provide an update

on OIP's work. The project has received more than 300 inquiries from Oregonians seeking help and is now representing five clients:

"We're looking forward to welcoming Anna and Cassandra to Portland," said Steve Wax, Legal Director of the Oregon Innocence Project. "Their story is a frightening insight into how people can be convicted based on the flimsiest of evidence as well as the harmful influence that prejudice and fearmongering can have in a courtroom."

THIS IS INNOCENCE will also feature the first presentation of a new award by the Oregon Innocence Project. Named for its first recipient, the Caren Rovics Volunteer Award will be given to a retired attorney who has volunteered around 30 hours a week with OIP since fall 2014:

"Caren's dedication to our cause and the spirit she brings to her work are outstanding," said Wax. "She has achieved the remarkable feat of reviewing more cases than any other person at the Oregon Innocence Project. We value her sharp judgment in assessing whether there is any path to proving innocence from our inquirers' claims."

Tickets for THIS IS INNOCENCE are still available and can be purchased online. More information is available from the Oregon Innocence Project website at <http://www.oregoninnocence.org/this-is-innocence-san-antonio-four/>.

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Opportunities are available to interview Anna Vasquez and Cassandra Rivera on Wednesday, May 10th, or Thursday, May 11th, in Portland. Please contact Alice Lundell for more information.

THIS IS INNOCENCE EVENT DETAILS

Date: May 11th, 2017

Time: 6 pm – 8:30 pm

Location: Urban Studio, 935 NW Davis St, Portland, OR 97209

Ticket price: \$125 including hors d'oeuvres, beer and wine

Tickets: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/this-is-innocence-a-fundraiser-for-oregon-innocence-project-tickets-33096913760>

Learn more: <http://www.oregoninnocence.org/this-is-innocence-san-antonio-four/>

All proceeds go to Oregon Innocence Project's work to free wrongfully convicted Oregonians.

NOTES TO EDITORS: Oregon Innocence Project (OIP) is administered by Oregon Justice Resource Center, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. OIP's mission is to exonerate the wrongfully convicted, promote reforms that prevent and address wrongful convictions, and train law students.