NEW ENGLAND INNOCENCE PROJECT

Voices of the Innocent: POWER IN COMMUNITY

Thursday, November 19, 2020, 7pm • Virtual Event

#VoicesoftheInnocent
November 19, 2020

Dear Friends,

This year, we have been confronted with many challenges. We have faced sickness and isolation; we have experienced and witnessed violence; and we have lost treasured leaders in the fight against injustice. At the same time, we have come together to confront racism; we have found ways to remain connected and support efforts to repair the world; and we have worked even harder to free people from prison.

This event is an opportunity for us to take stock of this year’s challenges and successes, while building support and awareness for our movement against wrongful convictions. It is a night to Rise Up and make a commitment to creating change in our communities.

We will hear from exonerees about their journey and celebrate the freedom they once lost and now cherish. We will honor the legacy of Chief Justice Ralph Gants, who was committed to correcting and preventing wrongful convictions and who attended our inaugural event last year to hear from those directly impacted. We will also honor the memory of exoneree Bobby Joe Leaster, who spent 15 years in prison for a crime he did not commit, and who contributed so much to our communities after he was released. We remain inspired and guided by their generosity and wisdom.

We are so appreciative that you have joined us for this special event during a year when our work to free innocent people from prison is more important than ever. We are grateful for your support. Together, we can build power in this community and work toward justice.

Sincerely,

Radha Natarajan

Radha Natarajan, Executive Director
New England Innocence Project
WELCOME FROM OUR SPONSORS

GOODWIN

WHITE & CASE
We are grateful to our exoneree speakers who courageously share about the injustices they have suffered in order to prevent others from experiencing the same fate.

Natale Cosenza: Exoneration # 2129
Nat returns to Voices of the Innocent this year after being an exoneree storyteller at the inaugural Voices of the Innocent: Still We Rise in 2019. Nat was exonerated in 2017 after spending 16 years in prison for assault and battery with a dangerous weapon and armed burglary, crimes he did not commit. Despite DNA evidence that supported his innocence, he was convicted because of a mistaken eyewitness identification. His jury was prevented from hearing from an identification expert who could have explained the ways in which the eyewitness evidence was unreliable. When his conviction was finally overturned, a judge ruled that the eyewitness evidence was not admissible because it was a result of extremely suggestive procedures. Nat’s exoneration followed.

Ray Champagne: Exoneration # 2653
Ray was released in February and exonerated in July of 2020. He spent the last 45 years in prison after being wrongfully convicted of a murder he did not commit. Decades after Ray’s trial, he discovered witness statements that had been given to the police that would have demonstrated his innocence. These statements had never been disclosed to Ray or his defense team. While in prison, Ray devoted decades of service on the board of Prisoners’ Legal Services and volunteered with the Prison Library Project. Ray is one of the founders of the newly created “Exoneree Network,” an initiative funded by NEIP to support the practical, emotional, and spiritual reentry needs of exonerees.
Sean Ellis: Exoneration # 2364
Sean returns to Voices of the Innocent this year after being an exoneree storyteller at the inaugural Voices of the Innocent: Still We Rise in 2019. He is the subject of the Netflix docu-series, Trial 4, just released on November 11, 2020. Arrested at the age of 19 for the murder of a police officer, Sean was convicted at his third trial only after two juries could not reach a unanimous verdict. Sean was exonerated in 2018 after spending nearly 22 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Significant police corruption and misconduct, including witness coercion, as well as misleading forensic evidence, led to Sean’s wrongful conviction. Sean is currently a NEIP Trustee and is one of the founders of the newly created “Exoneree Network,” an initiative funded by NEIP to support the practical, emotional, and spiritual reentry needs of exonerees.

Darrell Jones: Exoneration # 2468
Darrell spent 32 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. He was released from incarceration in 2017 when his conviction was overturned based on police misconduct, unreliable evidence, and a racially biased jury. Darrell was finally exonerated in 2019 when a jury acquitted him (in only two hours!) after a retrial. Darrell has been a strong and important voice for change, highlighting systemic inequality and prison conditions both before and after his release from his wrongful incarceration.

Dennis Maher
Dennis is often called the “grandfather” of Massachusetts exonerees because he was one of the first to be exonerated. In 1984, Dennis was wrongfully convicted after five eyewitnesses misidentified him because of suggestive police identification procedures. Dennis fought for years to have the physical evidence in his cases tested for DNA, but his motions were always denied without a hearing. When Dennis was finally granted the opportunity to conduct DNA tests, they proved his innocence in all the cases. Dennis was exonerated in 2003 after spending 19 years in prison for crimes he did not commit.
Victor Rosario: Exoneration # 2092
Victor returns to Voices of the Innocent this year after being an exoneree storyteller at the inaugural Voices of the Innocent: Still We Rise in 2019. Victor was exonerated in 2017 after spending 32 years in prison for murders he did not commit. Victor’s conviction was based on faulty arson science and a coerced false confession. Victor and his wife, Beverly, have since founded an organization to help incarcerated people maintain contact with their families and to provide reentry support for those returning to the community. Victor is currently a NEIP Trustee and is one of the founders of the newly created “Exoneree Network,” an initiative funded by NEIP to support the practical, emotional, and spiritual reentry needs of exonerees. An ordained minister, Victor often plays a spiritual support role for exonerees.

Keyon Sprinkle: Exoneration # 2619
Keyon was released in February and exonerated in May of 2020 after spending 20 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. Arrested at age 17 and wrongfully convicted at age 19, Keyon’s conviction was secured through coerced and false “eyewitness” testimony that was later undermined or recanted. Because of his young age when he was arrested, Keyon eventually became eligible for parole; however, because he maintained his innocence, he was denied his freedom. This year, a Suffolk Superior Court judge overturned his conviction after he presented compelling evidence of innocence, including his own testimony. He was exonerated a few months later.

James Watson: Exoneration # 2693
James (“Jimmy”) is the newest member of the Massachusetts exoneree family! Released in April and exonerated on November 10, 2020, Jimmy has spent more than 40 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. Jimmy’s wrongful conviction was caused by hypnosis-induced eyewitness identifications and witnesses who testified after either being promised assistance or threatened with criminal charges. He has now been reunited with his son, Don, who was only 15 months old when Jimmy was wrongfully imprisoned.
The New England Innocence Project thanks the following artists for sharing their talent and supporting the fight against wrongful convictions.

David Coleman • Pianist & Music Director

David Freeman Coleman holds a B.Mus in performance and composition from Boston University, a M.A. in composition from Tufts University, and has been choral directing for 30 years. He serves as the Director of Choral Music at the Dana Hall School in Wellesley and the director of the 225-voice Tufts University Third Day Gospel Choir.

David has served as music director and rehearsal pianist for several productions, including the 2012 Tony Award-winning production of The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess, and Choir Boy for which he received an Elliot Norton Award Nomination for Outstanding Musical Direction. Choirmaster for the Boston Landmarks Orchestra, he has worked with choirs for Mariah Carey, Bobby McFerrin, Patti Labelle, Phish, and Academy Award Nominee Ryan Gosling. He has performed at House of Blues, the Wang Center, Fenway Park, Symphony Hall, the Vatican, Carnegie Hall and the White House.

In 2010, BBC World News America featured David in their “First Person” series which was broadcast to 300 million people worldwide. Recognized by Boston musicians for his work in gospel music, David was the 2007 recipient of the Thomas A. Dorsey Award from the New England Conservatory. In 2013, he received awards for Best Male Gospel Artist, Best Gospel Producer, and Best Gospel CD at the New England Urban Music Awards.

The New England Innocence Project appreciates David’s guidance and artistry. Thank you for helping us raise our voices this evening.
Michelle Collado • Multidisciplinary Artist

Michelle Collado is a Dominican multidisciplinary artist born and raised in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

The daughter of immigrant parents, Michelle is inspired by the everyday people around her. She centers them as subjects of her art and focuses on their relationships with themselves, others, and the spaces they encounter. Whether it’s photography, film production, painting or illustration, she attempts to capture the essence of experiences and feelings with which her audience can familiarize themselves and identify.

Her artwork highlights BIPOC and explores themes of social justice, collective experiences, emotions, identity and self-awareness.

Elevated Thought is a national creative youth development organization that addresses forms of systemic injustice through creative youth development, beautification projects, public outreach, and paid opportunities for BIPOC creatives. The members of Elevated Thought believe that creativity supports the liberation of individuals and communities.

The New England Innocence Project is grateful to Michelle for sharing with us images that embody freedom and solidarity, and we are thrilled to showcase Michelle’s original illustrations honoring the memory and legacy of exoneree Bobby Joe Leaster and Chief Justice Ralph Gants.
Sherée Marcelle Dunwell • Vocalist

Sherée Marcelle Dunwell is an award-winning vocalist from Boston, MA. After earning a BFA in vocal performance from Carnegie Mellon University, she returned to New England where she has been performing ever since.

In 2017, she played a featured singing role in the film The Comedian, starring Robert De Niro, Danny DeVito and Patti LuPone. In 2015, she was named grand champion of WCVB’s Community Auditions, hosted by Billy Costa. As a featured artist with the Front Porch Arts Collective and the Black voices project, she is dedicated to the pursuit of racial equality in Boston and beyond.

When not performing, Sherée is an avid philanthropist, having run 8 Boston Marathons and raised over $100,000 for the Mass Mentoring partnership. A huge advocate of the work of innocence organizations, she is honored to be participating today.

*The New England Innocence Project appreciates Sherée’s emotional performance, giving us the inspiration to “rise up and do it a thousand times again.”*
Cynthia A. Harmon • Vocalist

Cynthia A. Harmon is the Chief Operating Officer of NorthStar Asset Management, Inc., a socially responsible investment management firm she joined in 2018 after twenty-three years of service to The Park School in Brookline. She held a variety of positions at Park, including the Head of School, demonstrating vision and skilled leadership, and working tirelessly to increase the school's diverse populations. She has presented at the National Association of Independent Schools’ People of Color Conference, served on numerous academic committees as well as on the boards of Thompson Island Outward Bound Educational Center and Boston Center for Community and Justice. As an educator and administrator, Cynthia has balanced big-picture thinking and attention to detail, essential elements to running a successful, mission-driven institution. Her role at NorthStar allows her to bring a fresh perspective to the company’s systems and processes.

Cynthia eagerly supports organizations dedicated to social justice, education, and youth leadership. She sits on the Board of Trustees at the Cambridge School of Weston and is a founding member of the Board of Directors for The Possible Project, an entrepreneurship program for underserved high school students from Cambridge and Boston. Recently, Cynthia joined the Board of Visitors at Fenway Health.

A native of Philadelphia, Cynthia holds a Bachelor of Music Education, a Master of Music degree in classical voice, and a Graduate Diploma in Opera.

The New England Innocence Project is deeply grateful to Cynthia for sharing her talent with us once again this year and for helping us celebrate the new days and new lives made possible by our work to exonerate the wrongfully convicted.
Thaddeus Miles • Photographer

Thaddeus Miles is an author and internationally recognized, award-winning photographer who serves as the Director of Community Services at MassHousing.

His previous work at Harvard Law School and Massachusetts Institute of Technology reinforced his steadfast commitment to ensuring that the most underserved members of our cities have genuine opportunities for success and achievement.

Thaddeus has founded local, national and international initiatives and serves on many nonprofit boards. He founded HoodFit, a movement to amplify the positive attributes in communities of color, Think Big Dream Big, a youth-driven initiative, the Alray Scholarship Fund, and co-founded two technology consortiums.

Thaddeus is currently the co-chair of My Brother’s Keeper Boston and Chair of Becoming a Man (BAM), Boston. Recent awards include the GK100, 2018 Boston’s 100 Most Influential People of Color, the Visionary Award from The Timothy Smith Foundation, Embracing the Legacy by The Robert F. Kennedy Action Corp, and The Directors Community Award by the Director of the FBI.

Thaddeus is a veteran of the United States Air Force and a devoted father, grandfather and friend.

*The New England Innocence Project is honored to feature Thaddeus’s powerful photographs of joy, resistance, and community this evening.*
SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT CHIEF JUSTICE RALPH D. GANTS
(1954 - 2020)

EXONEREE BOBBY JOE LEASTER
(1950 - 2020)

GENEROSITY. WISDOM. LEADERSHIP.

"Bobby Joe Leaster and Ralph Gants were two of the giants in the social justice movement: one did it with his voice on the streets; the other one did it in the courtrooms with his writing. The messages were the same: respect for each other, rule of law, understanding that it’s a very imperfect system that we have, that it’s a work in progress, and keep fighting for it."

Superior Court Judge Christopher J. Muse (retired)
BOBBY JOE LEASTER was born in Reform, Alabama, on January 8, 1950. Even though he had a basketball scholarship to attend school in Mississippi, he chose to move North to Boston. On September 27, 1970, the course of Bobby Joe’s life changed forever. A man Bobby Joe did not know was murdered. Bobby Joe was at home with his girlfriend at the time of the murder; however, when the police began looking for potential suspects, they found Bobby Joe miles away wearing similar clothes to the assailant. This was enough for the police to bring Bobby Joe to an identification procedure, a “show-up” in which Bobby Joe, in handcuffs, was the only person shown to the eyewitness. The witness, who was the widow of the person killed, identified Bobby Joe and he was charged with the murder. After his wrongful conviction for murder, Bobby Joe spent 15 years fighting for his freedom, alongside Robert and Christopher Muse. He was finally exonerated when new evidence, including another eyewitness to the murder, demonstrated his innocence. Bobby Joe used every moment of his freedom to contribute to the community. He was a Street Worker in Boston, and he spoke frequently about his wrongful conviction in order to inspire others to take action. He told his story to change policy and change minds. He did everything with kindness, generosity, and an enormous smile.

CHIEF JUSTICE RALPH GANTS was born in New Rochelle, New York, on September 29, 1954. After an illustrious career, he became the first Jewish Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court in 2014. In that position, he worked tirelessly and strategically to address what he saw as the most pressing issues: criminal justice, access to justice, and racial justice. He did not believe in staying on the sidelines: he spoke out against mandatory minimum sentencing, racial disparities in the criminal legal system, and wrongful convictions. He brought people together in order to form consensus around these issues, and he always believed consensus was possible and necessary for change. He was courageous but not foolhardy; his opinions were supported by meticulous research he compiled and studied. He cared deeply about people and the impact of legal decisions on people. He led with intellectual strength and a humble and generous heart.
The ARC OF JUSTICE award recognizes a New England Innocence Project partner who has demonstrated unparalleled commitment, tenacity, and courage to “bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice” for innocent people convicted of crimes they did not commit. The principle behind the Arc of Justice Award is that the arc only bends toward justice when people pull it there; it does not happen on its own.

2020 is a year to celebrate the power of community, and this year, it is our distinct honor to present the 2020 ARC OF JUSTICE Award to a community of people:

E. Peter Parker
Joseph Savage and Ashley Drake of Goodwin Law
Chad Higgins of Bernstein Shur
Investigator Rick Hamilton

Together, this team worked to end the 20-year nightmare that Keyon Sprinkle and his family have endured when he was wrongfully convicted. Keyon Sprinkle was imprisoned as a teenager for a crime he did not commit, and it was only after years of investigation and litigation that Keyon Sprinkle was finally exonerated on May 11, 2020.

Overturning wrongful convictions, and fighting against injustice, requires a movement. It takes a community of people who, when they come together, are an undeniable force for change. Through this close partnership, E. Peter Parker, Joseph Savage, Ashley Drake, Chad Higgins, and Rick Hamilton, all demonstrated fierce compassion and perseverance in pulling the arc of the moral universe toward justice and succeeding.
E. Peter Parker • Attorney • Law Office of E. Peter Parker

Peter has been representing people accused of crimes since 1988. Prior to building his own law practice, Peter worked at the Federal Defenders and Mintz Levin. Peter was Keyon Sprinkle’s trial lawyer and met 17-year-old Keyon for the first time in November 1999. “Nothing shook me from the initial strong feeling that he was innocent.”

Joseph F. Savage, Jr. • Attorney • Goodwin

Joe was a founding member of the New England Innocence Project in 2000. He is a Partner at Goodwin, where he has earned a reputation for being one of the most accomplished trial lawyers in the nation. He is a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers. On whether he knew Keyon would one day be exonerated: “We knew the right answer; we just didn’t know what the answer was that we were going to get.”

Ashley Drake • Attorney • Goodwin

Ashley has been an Associate at Goodwin since 2015. She is a member of the Boston Bar Association and was a senior articles editor for the Howard Law Journal. Reflecting on what Keyon Sprinkle’s case has taught her: “Seeing this case and just how young Keyon was when it all started and just how long it took him to get to this point, it really makes you realize that there are plenty of people who are in prison and shouldn’t be.”

Chad Higgins • Attorney • Bernstein Shur

Chad is a Shareholder at Bernstein Shur, working in the Portland, Maine office. He is a seasoned litigator. He first began working on Keyon Sprinkle’s case when he was at Goodwin. On the fight to exonerate Keyon: “I wasn’t just fighting on behalf of a client anymore. I was really personally invested in fighting on behalf of a friend.”

Richard (Rick) Hamilton • Investigator

Rick began his career as a journalist, winning several awards for his investigative reporting. In 1982, he opened his own firm as a private investigator. He specialized in defense work and investigated several innocence cases, including those of Donnell Johnson and Keyon Sprinkle. He passed away in 2013 after a battle with cancer. Meir Hamilton on how his dad would feel about winning this award: “The real award is that Keyon’s free. And I think that’s what my dad would care about.”
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JOIN THE FIGHT AGAINST WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS

Fighting even one wrongful conviction requires thousands of hours and thousands of dollars, but we think every second and every penny is worth it. Freedom is worth it. Any gift you make tonight goes toward our efforts to free people from prison and reunite them with their families. If we work together, there is power in our community to create change. JOIN US.

How to give online: CLICK HERE TO DONATE
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With you, it can be a reality.

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By donating $500 or more OR by making a monthly pledge of $50 or more, you will be entered to win your choice of one of these beautiful framed photographs by Thaddeus Miles. Winners will be contacted after the event.
Goodwin is proud to support The New England Innocence Project in its mission to correct and prevent wrongful convictions.

The firm congratulates its lawyers Joseph Savage and Ashley Drake for receiving the 2020 Arc of Justice Award honoring their successful fight against injustice for Keyon Sprinkle.

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Wishing you the greatest success!

TOWN FAIR TIRE Foundation
Foley Hoag is proud to support the New England Innocence Project and congratulates the Arc of Justice Award 2020 Honorees: Joseph Savage, Ashley Drake, Chad Higgins, E. Peter Parker and Rick Hamilton.
Latham & Watkins is proud to support the New England Innocence Project and the Voices of the Innocent: Power in Community event.

Congratulations to this year’s honorees for their outstanding pro bono work to free those wrongfully convicted.
Ropes & Gray

is proud to support the

NEW ENGLAND INNOCENCE PROJECT

and

VOICES OF THE INNOCENT: POWER IN COMMUNITY

We congratulate the recipients of this year's Arc of Justice Award:

JOSEPH SAVAGE
Goodwin

CHAD HIGGINS
Bernstein Shur

ASHLEY DRAKE
Goodwin

E. PETER PARKER

RICK HAMILTON

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Vertex is proud to support The New England Innocence Project
It Takes A Community

VOICES OF THE INNOCENT: POWER IN COMMUNITY, an endeavor undertaken in the midst of a global pandemic, was made possible by so many in our community.

We are grateful to all the Staff and Trustees of the New England Innocence Project, without whom we would not be able to carry out our important mission. We are especially thankful to Jordan Salvatoriello for making this event possible, using her unique skills to amplify these important stories of wrongful conviction.

There are many people with whom we partner, and we could not possibly list all of them here. We deeply appreciate everyone who contributes to the freedom and support of those wrongfully convicted, including pro bono partners, co-counsel, amici, investigators, social workers, experts, volunteers, journalists, and donors. We would be remiss if we did not specifically mention Lisa Kavanaugh, Trustee and Director of the CPCS Innocence Program, whose contributions to and leadership in the fight against wrongful convictions are legion.

Finally, we want to thank the families and loved ones of those wrongfully convicted who are still waiting for freedom. Thank you for trusting us. We will keep fighting for you.