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VOWS

Herman Atkins and Machara Hogue



The couple share their first dance on a yacht in the harbor.

Sharon Schuster for The New York Times

By ABEL SALAS

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JUSTICE and true love, the basic joys of life in fact, had all but eluded his grasp. The twelve years he spent in prison, in part because of a case of mistaken identity, gave Herman Atkins ample time to consider them all.

"I lost everything," said Mr. Atkins, a soft-spoken 40-year-old. "My sons grew up without me. There were honestly times I wanted to give up. It was frustrating. I could just as easily have killed or been killed."

Mr. Atkins had already fathered two children with two different women when he was arrested in 1986, accused of committing a rape and robbery in a shoe store in Lake Elsinore, Calif. After failing to find the assailant in Lake Elsinore's high school yearbooks, the victim identified Mr. Atkins from a photo found in a station briefing room. (He was wanted for questioning in connection with a shootout involving two police officers, a crime that he denies he committed but for which he was later convicted.) A 45-year sentence was imposed for the shoe store crime.

"I didn't even know where Lake Elsinore was," said Mr. Atkins, who was raised in South Central Los Angeles by his mother and stepfather. As life on the outside slipped from

view, he attempted to reinforce his links to his young boys, marrying and then divorcing one of their mothers. In time even his stepfather, a California Highway patrolman, began doubting his innocence.

Several doors down from Mr. Atkins's childhood home lived Mama Johnson, whose young granddaughter Machara Hogue often joined her at a church attended by young Mr. Atkins and his family.

"I knew her Uncle Mitchell," he said. "I was 15, she was 10, so I didn't really pay much attention."

It wasn't until after Mr. Atkins was exonerated and ordered released on Feb. 18, 2000, that he and Ms. Hogue, now 35, truly came to know each other.

Mr. Atkins gained his freedom with assistance from the Innocence Project, a legal clinic and justice resource center established by Peter J. Neufeld and Barry C. Scheck at Yeshiva University in New York. The lawyers there responded to the impassioned letter he had written, and were able conclusively to prove his innocence through DNA evidence.

Once freed, Mr. Atkins returned to his boyhood home and began selling hip-hop clothing to passers-by. One summer day in 2003, Mr. Atkins drove by Mama Johnson's house and spotted his friend Mitchell Johnson in the driveway. "So I pulled over to talk to him," Mr. Atkins recalled. He also encountered Ms. Hogue, by then a divorced mother of three and an attendance clerk for the Compton, Calif., Unified School District, who had taken up residence at her grandmother's house. "That was the first time I actually saw her grown up," Mr. Atkins explained.

Ms. Hogue, as it turned out, already knew of Mr. Atkins's plight, having learned about it from a brother of his who supplied her with goods for the accessories and lingerie business she operated on the side. "She was aware of my experience and my situation," Mr. Atkins said. "She came out, gave me a hug and told me to get in touch."

When he noticed Ms. Hogue's car at her grandmother's place several weeks later, he stopped by and invited her to lunch. He said he wanted to discuss a business partnership, so she agreed.

Not long after their lunch, Mr. Atkins went further. "I knew that she was the kind of woman I needed in my life," he said, "so I asked her out to dinner."

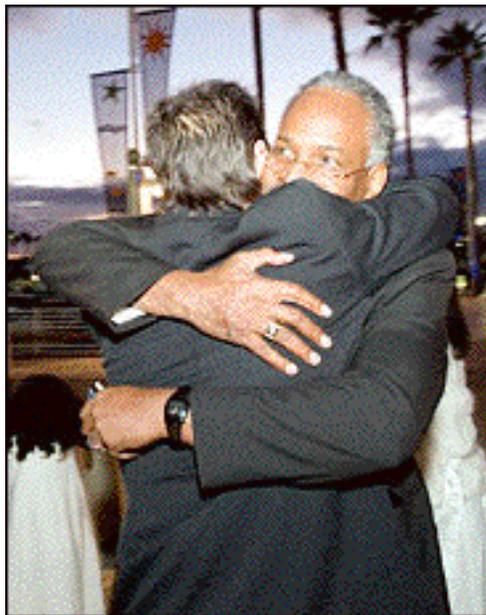
His romantic intentions caught her by surprise, and she was concerned that it would interfere with her business aspirations. Mr. Atkins assured her that they would be more

effective as a team. After dating for some time, Mr. Atkins convinced her to become part of a new venture, Faithful Vending, a company that operates gumball, toy crane and capsule machines throughout Southern California.

"Knowing what he had to go through inspired me," Ms. Hogue said. "It made me more compassionate."

On Feb. 18, Ms. Hogue and Mr. Atkins were married by the Rev. Johnny V. Baylor at the Judson Baptist Church in Carson, Calif., a ceremony attended by several dozen family members and friends, among them Mr. Neufeld and Mr. Scheck. At the reception and dinner that followed aboard a chartered yacht sailing from the Port of Long Beach, Jessica Sanders, the director of "After Innocence," a documentary about the Innocence Project that won a special jury prize at the 2005 Sundance Film festival, spoke about the woman who has made possible his Lazarus-like return. "When I met Machara, I knew she was the one," she said.

A week after the wedding, Mr. Atkins was reached by phone in Fresno, Calif., where he was recently accepted into a graduate psychology program. Mr. Neufeld and Debi Cornwall, an associate, have filed a multimillion lawsuit on Mr. Atkins's behalf against the arresting officer in the shoe store case. He reflected, tersely, on a life nearly ruined and on relationships past and present. "I was married, but never had the chance to fall in love until I got out."



The bridegroom greets a guest before boarding for the reception.