

<http://pioneer2010.occ.edu/index.php/features/60-feature/1586-author-shares-story-of-false-imprisonment>

The Innocence Project estimates that almost 3 percent of the nation's inmates are falsely convicted, said Dennis Fritz in a speech on campus recently.

Fritz spent 12 years of his life in the Oklahoma prison system serving time for a murder he did not commit. Fritz spoke about his "nightmare out of hell" during his presentation attended by a standing-room-only crowd of approximately 200 people. He also signed copies of his book, "Journey Toward Justice" before the event.

Fritz recalled the pivotal day in his life in 1987 when he was arrested at his mother's home in Kansas City, Mo., and charged with the 1982 rape and murder of Debra Sue Carter, a young woman from Ada, Okla. Fritz said he had never met the victim.

"I was really shook up," Fritz said when he recalled being told by Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation agents and Ada police that he had failed two lie detector examinations. He found out 12 years later that the investigators lied about the tests.

After his arrest, Fritz quickly realized he was in deep water. Before his extradition hearing, the OSBI and Ada detectives told him that he would die by lethal injection for his actions.

"I was like a lamb going to slaughter," Fritz said. "People were looking at me like I was a murderer."

An overzealous prosecutor continued to mount evidence against Fritz and his friend, Ron Williamson, a local high school baseball legend who suffered from mental illness and alcohol abuse.

Since he could not afford a criminal defense attorney, Fritz received a court-appointed lawyer whose specialty was in bankruptcy and civil litigation.

"The pressure was just too enormous," Fritz said about the possibility of receiving the death penalty looming ahead. The trial jury rendered a guilty verdict which was no surprise to Fritz.

“I knew early on that only the good Lord above could get me out,” Fritz said about his miscarriage of justice.

“I was scared,” Fritz said about the trial’s penalty phase. He recalls his knees shaking when told that he was sentenced to life without parole. Williamson got the death penalty.

Fritz said what hurt the most was being taken away from his family and the “seed of thought that I (Fritz) could do this” planted with Fritz’s young daughter, Elizabeth.

“Prison is a cruel, rough, dangerous place,” Fritz said about settling into his life behind bars and eating breakfast with convicted murderers.

He spent eight years in the same cell while working on his case in the prison’s law library. While Fritz ran out of appeals, Williamson received a new trial due to 60 constitutional errors made at his first trial. With help from the Innocence Project, Fritz and Williamson were vindicated in 1999 after DNA technology exonerated both men.

Fritz felt cautious following his release from prison. He watched for cops all the time. He recalled a funny moment when he took his mother’s car for a quick trip, stopped for gas and discovered that the gasoline pump spoke to him.

“I knew I was really in trouble then,” Fritz said with a smile, since his years in prison had sheltered him from changing technology.

While Fritz received post-traumatic stress counseling to adapt back into society, Williamson’s mental health continued in a downward spiral.

“Ronnie couldn’t go on because it hurt him too much,” Fritz said wistfully about his friend who died of cirrhosis in 2004.

DNA testing also identified the true killer, Glen Gore, who originally testified against Williamson. Gore was convicted and sentenced to death. Gore’s sentence was overturned and he now is serving a life sentence without parole in the same prison where Fritz was incarcerated.

Despite his exoneration and Gore’s guilty verdict, Fritz never received an apology from the prosecutor.

“False convictions are such tragedies,” Fritz said. “All of us have a responsibility to safeguard against them.”

One member of the audience commented on the speech.

“He changed my opinion on the death penalty because you’re not always innocent until proven guilty,” said Kristi Hendricks, Tuttle Times office manager and OCCC Library technical services assistant, following Fritz’s speech. “It’s compelling how this can happen in America,” Hendricks said.

For more information about The Innocence Project, please visit [www.innocenceproject.org](http://www.innocenceproject.org).

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## Dennis Fritz

Dennis Fritz, along with co-defendant Ron Williamson, was convicted in 1988, in Pontotoc County, Oklahoma, of the murder of Debra Sue Carter. Her body had been found six years earlier. Fritz was sentenced to life in prison. Williamson was sent to death row.

The twenty-one year old victim had left her waitressing job and was found raped and murdered in her apartment the following day. Fritz and Williamson were known to frequent the establishment where the victim worked. The prosecution presented evidence that the victim had previously complained to a friend that they "made her nervous." Williamson had been seen at the restaurant the night of the murder without Fritz.

Fritz was not charged until five years after the murder (delayed by state exhumation of victim after an incorrect analysis of finger prints at the scene was noted). An inmate that Fritz was paired with eventually came forward and stated that Fritz had confessed to the murder. This jailhouse snitch gave a two hour taped interview revealing what Fritz had allegedly confessed to him. This confession came one day before the prosecution would have been forced to drop the charges against Fritz. Another informant testified that she had heard Williamson threaten to harm his mother as he had the victim. Williamson was also seen at the bar the night of the murder, according to a witness named Glenn Gore. Additionally, police had statements from Williamson regarding a dream he had about the crime.

Forensic testing was performed on various items of evidence. An analyst testified that 11 pubic hairs and two head hairs from the crime scene were "consistent" with Fritz's hair. "This means they match, if you want it in one word," the analyst testified. Because there is not adequate empirical data on the frequency of various class characteristics in human hair, it is impossible to say definitively that strands of hair "match."

The analyst also tested semen evidence from the crime and testified that he did not detect blood group substances, meaning the result was consistent with a non-secretor (Fritz, Williamson and the victim were all non-secretors). The analyst testified incorrectly that this result meant the perpetrator was a non-secretor. No potential semen donor could be excluded, however, because the victim's blood group markers could be "masking" the perpetrator's. Under such circumstances, the failure to inform the jury that 100% of the male population could be included and that none can be excluded is highly misleading.

Fritz could not remember his exact whereabouts during the day of the crime due to the amount of time, five years, that had passed. The two men were convicted, Fritz was sentenced to life and Williamson to death.

Fritz's appeals were denied. He later contacted the Innocence Project for help. It was learned that the physical evidence was going to be tested due to appeals filed by Ron Williamson's lawyers. Fritz filed an injunction to make sure that the evidence would not be totally consumed until the cases were joined with regard to DNA testing.

**State:** Oklahoma

**County:** Pontotoc

**Most Serious Crime:** Murder

**Additional Convictions:**

**Reported Crime Date:** 1982

**Convicted:** 1988

**Exonerated:** 1999

**Sentence:** Life

**Race:** Caucasian

**Sex:** Male

**Age:** 22

**Contributing Factors:** False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Perjury or False Accusation

**Did DNA evidence contribute to the exoneration?** Yes

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DNA testing revealed that neither Fritz nor Williamson deposited the spermatozoa found in the victim. Further testing proved that none of the many hairs that were labeled "matches" belonged to them. The profile obtained from the semen evidence matched Glenn Gore, one of the state's witnesses at trial. Gore escaped from work release shortly after testing was concluded and was later apprehended.

Dennis Fritz and Ron Williamson were exonerated and released in April 1999. Williamson had, at one point, come within five days of execution. The two had been wrongfully incarcerated, respectively, for eleven years.

*Summary courtesy of the Innocence Project, <http://www.innocenceproject.org/>. Reproduced with permission.*

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