

<http://www.victimsofthestate.org/PA/indexW.html>

**Washington County, PA**

**Tiffany Pritchett**

**Dec 14, 1993 (Donora)**

Tiffany Pritchett was convicted of murdering Troy Grooms, 25. In March 1995, Dameon Isbell was caught trying to rob a Donora Uni-Mart with the gun that killed Grooms. Once arrested, Isbell told state troopers he had witnessed Pritchett kill Grooms and then stole the gun from where she had stashed it. He said Pritchett, who had no criminal record, sought revenge because Grooms had raped her. Pritchett denied the rape allegation and told police she watched Isbell execute Grooms in a dispute over drugs. After Isbell passed a polygraph test, his statement was used to charge Pritchett with murder.

Pritchett's attorney, Francis Sichko, allowed his client to be polygraphed while he was at a Pitt/ Temple football game. After the test, state troopers interrogated Pritchett. They claimed the test proved her guilt. "They started banging on the desk and hollering, trying to scare me and things like that, a lot of intimidation," said Pritchett. Troopers claimed Pritchett confessed, although they did not take notes or ask her to sign a confession. Pritchett denied the confession, but was convicted.

In 1998, Pritchett submitted an affidavit from an inmate stating that Isbell had bragged that he had gotten away with killing Grooms. In 2006, when a judge was considering Pritchett's application for a new trial, the prosecutor offered her a deal: If she dropped the appeal and pleaded guilty to a felony murder count, she would be released. Pritchett declined the offer. She won a new trial. Rather than remain incarcerated through prosecution appeals of the new trial order, which could take years, Pritchett accepted a time-served plea deal in which she did not have to admit guilt. (*Post-Gazette*) [12/06]

<http://blog.law.northwestern.edu/bluhm/2006/10/index.html>

A recent Pennsylvania case illustrates the dilemma. Tiffany Pritchett, after serving 6 years in prison for a crime she maintains she did not commit, recently pled no contest to a third degree murder charge, a decision which enabled her to be released with time-served as opposed to waiting out appeals and a retrial in her case. Pritchett's 1994 conviction for first degree murder was reversed after a trial court judge held that her attorney was ineffective for allowing her to take a polygraph exam while he went to a football game. Ms. Pritchett's case was the subject of an investigative report by Bill Moushey and several of his journalism students at the Innocence Institute at Point Park in Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. <http://www.postgazette.com/pg/06285/729303-58.stm>

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Woman free on plea deal after 12 years in prison

Thursday, October 12, 2006

By Janice Crompton, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

After six years of appeals and 12 years behind bars, a Washington County woman should be free some time today for the first time in her adult life.

Tiffany Pritchett, 30, of Donora, was ordered released yesterday by Washington County President Judge Debbie O'Dell Seneca following lengthy plea negotiations by defense counsel and the county district attorney's office.

Ms. Pritchett, who maintains her innocence, pleaded no contest yesterday to third-degree murder charges in the December 1993 shooting death of Troy Groomes, 25, also of Donora.

Ms. Pritchett was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison in 1994. She was sentenced to 69 to 138 months in prison, but she already has served more than 143 months.



**Tiffany Pritchett**

Ms. Pritchett was convicted chiefly on the testimony of a co-defendant, Dameon Isbell, who claimed he, Mr. Groomes, and Ms. Pritchett watched a movie at a friend's house, then walked up a snow-covered hill, where Ms. Pritchett shot Mr. Groomes in the back of the head.

Police had no suspects in the case until three months later, when Mr. Isbell was found in possession of the gun used in the homicide while attempting to rob a Donora convenience store. He told police Ms. Pritchett, who had no criminal record, shot Mr. Groomes over a rape.

Mr. Isbell was not charged in the murder and served six years for a robbery conviction.

Ms. Pritchett's 1994 murder conviction was overturned earlier this year after a judge ruled her trial lawyer was ineffective for allowing Ms. Pritchett to submit to a polygraph exam alone while he attended a college football game.

Ms. Pritchett's appeals languished for years until Washington lawyer Noah Geary took over her case two years ago.

Ms. Pritchett rejected previous plea offers and was ready for a new court battle, Mr. Geary said. Her grandmother's failing health and an appeal from the county district attorney's office, however, persuaded Ms. Pritchett to accept the offer rather than wait several more years for a new trial.

Ms. Pritchett, dressed in the standard orange Washington County Correctional Facility uniform with her hair held back in a headband, looked nervous and made no comments during the court proceeding. Family members sobbed quietly.

After the pleas, Ms. Pritchett looked relieved but had no comment as she left the courtroom.

County Assistant District Attorney Michael Fagella said he was satisfied with the outcome, as was District Attorney John C. Pettit.

"I think that justice has been served in this instance," Mr. Pettit said. "We're pleased that this is over and we'll move on to the next case."

While Ms. Pritchett has been in prison, Mr. Geary said, she earned her high school diploma and several certifications. Ms. Pritchett is anxious to leave prison, he said, and see new things, such as cell phones. She plans to attend college and keeps a positive outlook.

"Amazingly, she is not bitter," Mr. Geary said.

Still "young and naive," Mr. Geary said, Ms. Pritchett will move from the area after her release, expected some time today.

"She has a lot of life ahead, and she plans to live it," Mr. Geary said.

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Janice Crompton can be reached at [jcrompton@post-gazette.com](mailto:jcrompton@post-gazette.com) or 724-223-0156.

Read more: <http://www.postgazette.com/pg/06285/729303-58.stm#ixzz1nnxfbCRc>

<http://truthinjustice.org/tiffany-pritchett.htm>



## False Confessions: Tiffany Pritchett / Won't deal away her innocence

Friday, September 01, 2006

By Elizabeth Perry, Special to the Post-Gazette

On Dec. 13, 1993, Tiffany Pritchett, Troy Groomes and Dameon Isbell watched a movie at a friend's house in Donora, Washington County, then trekked up a snowy hill toward their neighborhood.

According to Mr. Isbell, a gang member at 19, Miss Pritchett then shot Mr. Groomes in the back of the head with a .380 semi-automatic revolver. He said Miss Pritchett, who had no criminal record, sought revenge because Mr. Groomes had raped her.

Miss Pritchett denied the rape allegation and told police she watched Mr. Isbell execute Mr. Groomes in a dispute over drugs.

Miss Pritchett eventually was convicted, based on what police characterized as a confession.

### **The robbery**

In March 1995, the Groomes investigation was going nowhere when a retired U.S. Marine foiled Mr. Isbell's attempt to rob a Donora Uni-Mart with the gun that killed Mr. Groomes.

Once arrested, Mr. Isbell told state troopers he had witnessed Miss Pritchett kill Mr. Groomes and then stole the gun from where she had stashed it.

Miss Pritchett countered that Mr. Isbell was the one who shot Mr. Groomes. After Mr. Isbell passed a polygraph test, his statement was used to charge Miss Pritchett with murder.

At the time of the killing, Miss Pritchett was 17 years old and on the run from a group home. She had cycled through the child welfare system since her crack-addicted mother had lost custody of her five years earlier. She had never met her father.

Miss Pritchett said in an interview that she didn't point the finger at Mr. Isbell at first because, growing up as she had, "I was always taught that you don't tell."

### **The case goes to trial**

On the stand, Mr. Isbell described himself as an innocent bystander as Miss Pritchett gunned down Mr. Groomes. He admitted to a life of crime but said he had never fired a weapon. Under cross examination, however, he conceded that he had participated in drive-by shootings as a member of the Crips street gang in Pittsburgh.

Mr. Isbell denied being offered lenient treatment in exchange for his testimony, but eventually murder charges against him were dropped and he received a reduced sentence for the attempted robbery. Another witness, Erica Guthrie, claimed that Miss Pritchett had confessed to the killing, but her credibility was questioned after she admitted a sexual relationship with both Mr. Isbell and Mr. Groomes.

At that point, Washington County District Attorney John Pettit, who had never lost a murder case, proposed a polygraph for Miss Pritchett.

Promised that he had "everything to gain" if his client passed the test, Miss Pritchett's attorney, Francis Sichko, allowed his client to be polygraphed while he was at a Pitt/Temple football game.

According to court documents, the testing and interrogation of Miss Pritchett lasted six hours. She said state troopers, who did not take notes or record any of the proceedings, were cordial until after the test, which they said proved her guilt.

"They started banging on the desk and hollering, trying to scare me and things like that, a lot of intimidation," she said on the stand. Miss Pritchett said she never confessed.

State troopers testified that Miss Pritchett had laughed softly and admitted killing Mr. Groomes. They did not ask Miss Pritchett to write a confession or sign a statement. One of the troopers admitted that he had not written anything about the interview until the next day.

When Mr. Sichko learned of the supposed confession, he asked a judge to suppress her statements because he was not present during her interrogation. The motion was denied.

Miss Pritchett was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to life without parole. Mr. Isbell was released after serving about six years for the robbery. He has had several run-ins with the law since then.

Mr. Pettit did not respond to phone messages or letters seeking comment for this story.

### **The appeals**

In a 1998 appeal, Miss Pritchett submitted an affidavit from a convict named Darnell Pearson stating that Mr. Isbell had bragged that he had gotten away with killing Mr. Groomes. The appeal was denied.

Years later, attorney Noah Geary of Washington, Pa. filed another appeal. He cited Mr. Pearson's statement and, among other things, Mr. Sichko's "outrageous decision ... to advise his 18-year-old client to submit to a polygraph examination mid-trial and then attend a college football game rather than accompany her."

Last spring, as a judge was considering whether Ms. Pritchett deserved a new trial, the Washington County prosecutor offered Ms. Pritchett a deal: If she dropped the appeal and pleaded guilty to a felony murder count, she would be released.

After days of consideration, Miss Pritchett, who had been imprisoned for 12 years, declined the offer.

"She said 'I'm innocent, I want to put it in the judge's hands.' If she would have taken the deal, she'd be out right now," said her stunned attorney, Mr. Geary.

In March, a judge reversed her conviction. She awaits a new trial.