

# THE EXONERATION PROJECT

## NEWSLETTER

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## JOHN MARTINEZ EXONERATED!

John Martinez was exonerated! On February 10th, the State of Illinois dismissed the case against Mr. Martinez. His is now the 38th exoneree associated with Detective Guevara's investigative misconduct and abuse.

Mr. Martinez was wrongfully convicted of a 1998 murder and spent over 20 years incarcerated. After the case went cold, Detective Guevara began to investigate and identified Mr. Martinez as the primary suspect. Like in other cases with his involvement, Guevara and his associates coerced witness identifications and forced testimonies in court to build a case against the innocent Mr. Martinez. He was charged with first degree murder and sentenced to 25 years.

Despite years of appellate advocacy in order to keep his case afloat, Mr. Martinez maintained his hope and optimism. In August, the State agreed to relief in his case. However, Judge Petrone refused to rule in the case and it proceeded to a two-day evidentiary hearing in August. In January the Judge granted Mr. Martinez a new hearing. In February, the State dismissed the case against Mr. Martinez and he was released and able to reunite with his parents, children, and grandchildren, all of whom were present at all of his court hearings.

Congratulations to Mr. Martinez and his family!

*(Pictured above, Mr. Martinez and his family right after his release)*

# CLASSIFIED: CHICAGO HOUSING AUTHORITY WORKFORCE OPPORTUNITY

The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) Workforce Opportunity Resource Center (WORC) will be hosting a networking event on **March 2nd** and we would like to invite you and your network of your eligible business owners. The event is called [Doing Business with CHA and Other Agencies Forum](#).

This event is intended to give companies that qualify as a Section 3 business an opportunity to hear about upcoming procurements from CHA and other City of Chicago Sister Agencies, as well as network with CHA contractors, developers, property managers and more. This will be a great opportunity for business owners that are interested in government contracting to meet new people and form new relationships. This event is open to all industries, not just construction.

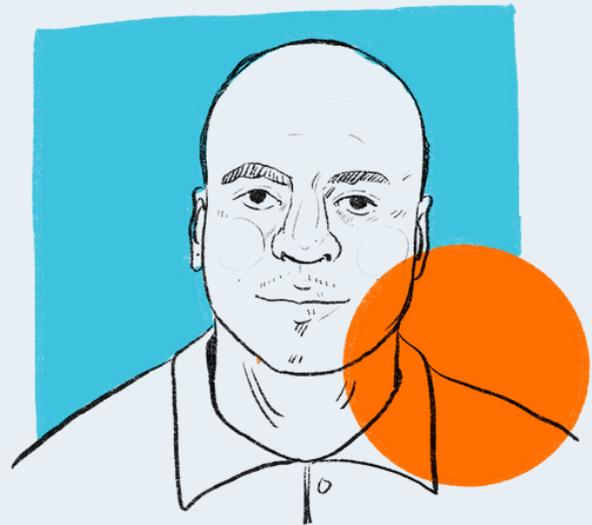
Please register using the link below if you're interested!

<https://tinyurl.com/CHAopportunity>



# EP CLIENT SPOTLIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH CARL WILLIAMS

BY PAGE CASSIDY



Carl Williams's story sounds like that of many of our Exoneration Project clients. Carl Williams was born and raised in the Low End, now Bronzeville, on the Southside of Chicago. He was a fun, family-grounded, and loving kid. He loved watching his father build things, spending time by Lake Michigan, and hanging out with cousins, uncles and friends. When he was 17, however, this all changed. Carl was wrongfully accused and convicted of a double homicide.

In January of 1994, the police came to Carl Williams's girlfriend's house and arrested him. He was coerced into giving a false confession and consequently sentenced to life without parole.

Carl had been introduced to the policing system long before this. Growing up as a kid, especially a Black kid, on the Southside of Chicago, he says it was impossible for him not to have had some interactions with the police. While incarcerated, he began to write letters. He wrote thousands of letters to law firms, nonprofits, advocacy groups, and anyone he thought might be able to help. For years he got few responses.

Although initially hesitant, Carl also surrounded himself with people who, despite their incarceration, were in a healthy headspace. This new community elevated his voice. They started book clubs and a debate team, teaching each other valuable skills. Carl was a very young man when he entered prison, but thanks to the community he built inside he was able to start his own business when he got out.

Carl stresses that he built a community despite being incarcerated, not because of it. Incarceration tears families and communities apart. Carl's family stuck by his side throughout his incarceration, but it took a toll on all of them. Two of his sons passed away while he was in prison. He lost years worth of time spent at the lake with his family. The lack of mental health support for incarcerated individuals and their families has major repercussions throughout communities and lives.

Since being released two years ago, Carl has started a custom carpentry business, begun to rebuild his family and connect with his living son, and join the exoneree community. He can see everyday how his son gives back to the community. His business, Royal Men Solutions, has been successful thanks to the skills he learned from his family in prison. He now uses carpentry as a way to mentor young men in his community and give them an outlet to express themselves.

The exoneree community provides him with an atmosphere to learn and grow. Getting out of prison does not mean life can just go back to "normal." Carl still feels the very real burden of being formerly incarcerated; certain stereotypes are placed on him by the wider world. The exoneree community understands these intricate dynamics and provides the supportive network he has searched for his entire life.

Carl is a father, a husband, a fun and loving Black man from the Southside of Chicago. He is a leader in his community, a friend, and a passionate changemaker. His identity is intricate and multifaceted. Thinking back on his time in prison, he shared this story:

*When I first got to Pontiac I was broken down by the system. Each day I would go out to the yard, sit by this little tree and pull pieces off of it. One day, an older man that everyone always said was talking crazy came up to me and asked, "Why you killing that bush?" I rolled my eyes and brushed him off. But the older man kept going: "never be the destroyer of beautiful things. That bush will give you the oxygen you need to survive as long as you don't kill it."*

As dark as Carl's story got, he had the power to control one thing: his impact on others.

Thank you to Carl Williams for allowing me to interview him for this piece. To learn more about Carl's company visit <https://www.royalmensolutions.com/>.



# BLACK HISTORY MONTH: CIVIL RIGHTS & MASS INCARCERATION

BY ELLIOT LIN



Following Black History Month, we at the EP want to highlight the history of mass incarceration in the United States and share the stories of significant events and figures that are often not discussed.

## EARLY 20TH CENTURY

*By some accounts, the rise of mass incarceration in the US began in the 1970s. However, shifting conditions in the US as soon as the early 20th century set the stage for the 1970s prison boom. When Black Americans moved to urban regions in the north, anxiety about crime flourished due to both racist stereotypes cast long before the turn of the century and a perceived increase in competition for jobs. From 1926-1940 the state prison population increased by 67%, fueled by an increase in harsh policing practices largely targeted at new migrants and Black Americans.*



## START OF THE 1960S

*By the 1960s, Civil Rights movements were on the rise, with several key pieces of legislation being passed. In large part as a reactive response, politicians introduced more stringent laws dealing with crime and crime sentencing.*



## 1965

*In 1965, Lyndon B Johnson first declared a “war on crime,” focusing on perceived increases in crime in urban centers — areas with a predominantly Black population. This cemented the connection between race and criminal activity in the public consciousness. After Johnson, Nixon famously declared a “war on drugs” during his time in office, using the idea of being “tough on crime” as a rhetoric to justify what amounted to a thinly veiled connection between street crime and the uptick of the civil rights movement.*



## INTO THE 70S

*The recession of the 1970s hit those working in “low-skilled” labor the most, leading to an increased unemployment of Black men and further concentrating working class people of color to a few urban centers. Politicians, rather than pouring effort into the reinvigoration of local communities, turned towards increasingly punitive measures as those cities faced even more disinvestment.*

## THE 80S

*By the mid-1980s, the state and federal prison population had increased dramatically, from around 196,000 in 1970 to more than 480,000 by 1985.*

## THE SITUATION TODAY

*Today, there are more than 1.2 million people behind bars, with a disproportionate number of inmates being Black. While many improvements have been made to both the criminal justice system and in the public perception, there is still much room for improvement—both policing and sentencing are still disproportionately harsh for Black Americans and people of color, and systemic discrimination remains a major issue in the justice system.*



# HIDDEN HISTORIES: COINTELPRO

*One prime example of the targeted and systemic discrimination present in the justice system can be seen in COINTELPRO —also known as the Counterintelligence Program. Conducted by the FBI from 1956 to 1971, COINTELPRO explicitly aimed to undermine growing civil rights movements. On March 8, 1971, three individuals broke into the FBI office in Pennsylvania and released information from 1,000+ classified documents to major newspapers.*

*As a 1976 report notes, “The major premise of COINTELPRO is ... maintaining the existing social order, and ... towards combating those who threaten that order”. Any group pushing for racial equality, including the Black Panther Party and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, could become a target of COINTELPRO disruption in the form of legal harassment, physical intimidation, blackmail, and more. These organizations were referred to as as “Black Extremist” or “Black Nationalist Hate Groups” to justify the brutality of the FBI’s actions.*

*The murder of Fred Hampton is a concrete example of COINTELPRO’s brutal actions. Hampton, a NAACP youth organizer who became the chair of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, worked extensively to teach political education to Chicago youth groups and push for collaboration between different minorities. These actions drew the ire of COINTELPRO, and in 1969, after months of harassment by the FBI, Hampton was shot and killed in his bed during a police raid while his pregnant partner slept beside him. Ultimately, Hampton was an innocent individual murdered by the FBI in the name of protecting the status quo.*



# HIDDEN HISTORIES: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



Perhaps no figure is more prominent in the history of Civil Rights than that of Martin Luther King. His leadership in the civil rights movement was integral to helping end the legal segregation of African Americans in the US, and he is best remembered for his use of nonviolent tactics to push back against systemic discrimination.

King was nevertheless the target of many violent operations by both the police and the FBI. In 1963, King's peaceful attempt to end segregation at lunch counters and in hiring practices was broken up when police turned fire hoses and police dogs against the protestors. The FBI also wiretapped King's phone and routinely bugged his hotel rooms, tracking his movement from city to city. They viewed his success as a threat to the status quo in America and fearing he could successfully unify and empower a "black nationalist movement" against the state.

On April 4th, 1968, King was assassinated as he stood on the second-story balcony of the Lorraine Motel. He had been in Memphis in support of a strike by sanitation workers. James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the murder the next year but later recanted his testimony, claiming lawyers had coerced him into a confession. King's family supported his version of the story.

In 1999, a jury issued a verdict that said, "others, including government agencies, were part of a conspiracy to assassinate King".



# HIDDEN HISTORIES: JOHNNIE COCHRAN

Another key figure in the history of civil rights and mass incarceration is trial lawyer and civil libertarian Johnny L. Cochran Jr. Cochran started his career as a criminal prosecutor and was witness to a system that unfairly prosecuted people of color for minor crimes. By 1965, Cochran had become one of Los Angeles' top trial lawyers, but having witnessed many injustices, he left the District Attorney's office to enter into private practice. Cochran would go on to represent many individuals who faced police discrimination and wrongful charges over his career.

During the Watts Riots, he represented protestors, cementing his desire to work for the people against this system. Then, he represented the wife of Leonard Deadwyler in 1966. Deadwyler was shot and killed by police officer Jerold Bova after being pulled over for speeding towards the hospital as his wife was in labor. This case generated mass outrage over the country, especially because of the sympathetic nature of Deadwyler's situation.

In 1971, Cochran represented Willie Stafford, Geronimo Pratt, and other members of the Black Panther Party after FBI attempts to disrupt and assassinate members of the organization ended in an exchange of gunfire. He was successful, with his clients being found not guilty on all serious charges.

In 1981, Cochran represented the family of Ron Settles, a local football star who had been "found" dead in his cell after being pulled over and arrested. Despite police testimony that Settles had been violent and under the influence of drugs, Cochran successfully argued that Settles had been brutally beaten by police officers.

Cochran's most famous case is his representation of O.J. Simpson in 1995. After a televised trial, Cochran aided in the acquittal of Simpson on both counts of murder. Soon after, in 1997, Geronimo Pratt's homicide conviction was also vacated, when it was proven that a key witness in his case had been an FBI informant and exculpatory evidence had been withheld by prosecution. Ultimately, Cochran's clients include a variety of figures, from the famous to the ordinary—Cochran continued to advocate for each and every one of them, all the way until his passing in 2005.



# NEED OUR HELP? FIND OUT MORE

*The Exoneration Project (EP) works to correct wrongful convictions only in cases where the accused is innocent of the crimes charged, meaning they did not commit the crime(s) and had no involvement in the crime(s). We do not take cases where the claim is an affirmative defense, such as consensual sex, self-defense, or accidental death.*

*To request help, fill out our application and email it to [intake@exonerationproject.org](mailto:intake@exonerationproject.org) or mail it to us at:*

*Exoneration Project Intake  
311 N. Aberdeen Street, 3rd Floor  
Chicago, IL 60607*



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