

# Death Row Exoneree Stories

Over 160 innocent people have been exonerated from Death Row since 1976. Here are some of their stories.

## KIRK BLOODSWORTH



An honorably discharged former Marine, Kirk Bloodsworth is the first person in the United States exonerated from death row by DNA testing.

In 1984 he was arrested for the rape and murder of 9-yr-old Dawn Hamilton. He was sentenced to death in Maryland. The circumstantial evidence pointing Kirk to the 1984 crime was the testimony of five witnesses who placed him either with the victim or near the scene of the crime.

In 1992, Kirk read about a new forensic breakthrough called DNA fingerprinting, and lobbied successfully for prosecutor's approval for its use on evidence collected at the crime. The tests incontrovertibly established Kirk's innocence, and he was released in June 1993. The DNA evidence would later identify the actual perpetrator, who was serving a prison sentence for another rape.

## JOE D'AMBROSIO

Joe D'Ambrosio was an honorably discharged sergeant in the US Army who spent 20 years on death row for the 1988 murder of Tony Klann. There was never any evidence that Joe was at the scene, but Joe and two other men, Michael Keenan and Ed Espinoza, were all charged with his murder. In exchange for Espinoza's incriminating testimony against Joe and Keenan, he was given a 12-year sentence. Joe was sent to death row.



In 2006 a federal judge ruled that prosecutors withheld critical exculpatory evidence in Joe's case including contradictory witness testimony and analysis from veteran detectives, and threw out Joe's conviction. Just before retrying Joe again, even more evidence was uncovered.

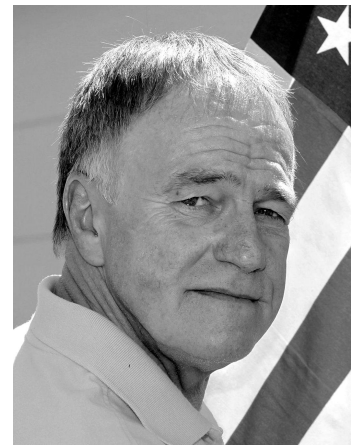
On January 23, 2013, when Joe finally became a free man, he said, "Today was 23 years in the making. Justice has finally prevailed."

## RANDY STEIDL

Randy Steidl spent 17 years in Illinois prisons, including 12 on death row, before his exoneration in 2004. He was wrongly convicted and sentenced to die for the 1986 murders of Dyke and Karen Rhoads. But an Illinois State Police investigation in 2000 found that local police had severely botched their investigation, and that the case was riddled with political corruption that led all the way to the Illinois Governor's office.

Randy had poor legal representation, and witnesses fabricated testimony against him due to police misconduct. An investigation by the Illinois State Police proved that local law enforcement and prosecutors had framed Randy. In 2003, a federal judge overturned Randy's conviction and ordered a new trial. The state reinvestigated the case, tested DNA evidence, and found no link to him.

On May 28, 2004, Randy was released.

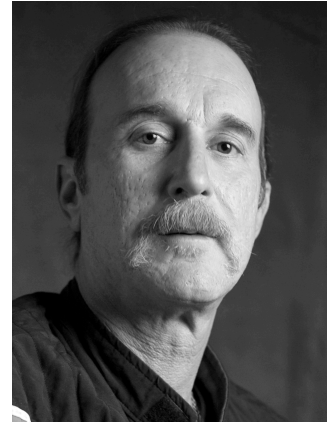


## RAY KRONE

Before his exoneration in 2002, Ray spent more than 10 years in Arizona prisons, including nearly three years on death row, for a murder he did not commit.

His world was turned upside down in 1991, when Kim Ancona was murdered in a Phoenix bar and he was arrested for the crime. The case against him was based largely on circumstantial evidence and the testimony of a supposedly "expert" witness, later discredited, who claimed bite marks found on the victim matched Ray's teeth. He was sentenced to death in 1992.

In 2002 an appeals court that DNA found at the murder scene indicated the guilt of another man, Kenneth Phillips. Ray became the 100th person exonerated from death row in the United States since 1973.



## JUAN MELENDEZ

Juan Roberto Meléndez-Colón spent nearly 18 years on Florida's death row for a crime he did not commit, before being exonerated in 2002.

The crime in Juan's case was particularly brutal. The victim was Delbert Baker, a white man, who was shot three times and had his throat slashed.

Juan, who could not afford an attorney, was convicted and sentenced to death within a week, even though there was no physical evidence against him. Had it not been for the fortuitous discovery of a transcript of the taped confession of the real killer 16



years after Juan was sentenced to death, he would have been executed. Ultimately, it came to light that the prosecutor had systematically withheld exculpatory evidence.

Juan has been tireless in his efforts to educate the public on the problems of the death penalty and the risks of executing an innocent person. "I will not stop until we have abolished the death penalty in every corner of this nation!"

## DEBRA MILKE



Debra Milke was arrested for the 1989 murder of her 4-year-old son Christopher, who was supposed to have been taken to a mall to see Santa by Debra's friend, James Styers.

Detective Saldate questioned Roger Scott, a friend of Styers, who led them to the boy's body. Detective Saldate claimed he was told that Debra Milke conspired to have her son murdered to receive a life insurance payout. Detective Saldate also claimed that Debra Milke confessed to the murder and tried to seduce her way out of the charge. Despite the complete lack of forensic or physical evidence, nor any implications in court from Roger Scott and James Styers of Debra's involvement, she was convicted of murder and sent to death row on the basis of the testimony of detective Saldate.

In 2013, after 20 years on death row, an appeals court overturned Debra's conviction after learning that prosecutors withheld from the jury Saldate's personnel record, which included a long history of providing false testimony, lying under oath and felony extortion. Chief Judge Alex Kozinski of the federal 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals wrote: "The Constitution requires a fair trial, this never happened in Milke's case. The state knew of the evidence in the personnel file and had an obligation to produce the documents . . . there can be no doubt that the state failed in its constitutional obligation." Debra Milke was freed in March, 2015.