Teen Sentenced to Life for a Crime He Did Not Commit Freed After 40 Years

New Orleans – Today, 59-year-old Gerald Manning walked out of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a free man for the first time in his adult life.

Mr. Manning was a 17-year-old high school student when Vonda Harris was raped and murdered in Monroe, Louisiana in 1977, a tragedy that roiled the local community. Six months later, desperate police interrogated the naïve teen for 33 hours without a lawyer or a parent present until, according to Mr. Manning, “I got tired of it and I just said what they wanted me to say.”

Although Mr. Manning immediately disavowed his statements, the false confession was the only evidence used to convict him of attempted aggravated rape and second-degree murder, which then carried a mandatory life sentence despite his young age.

Vonda Harris’ family has never believed that Mr. Manning was involved in her death. At trial, Ms. Harris’ mother sat with Mr. Manning’s mother, both sick with grief for the loss of their children.

“Our family never had justice,” said Ms. Harris’ daughter, Rhondalyn Harris, who was a toddler at the time of the murder. “We’ve suffered all these years knowing that an innocent man was sitting in prison while my mom’s real killer went free.”

Recent scientific research into adolescent brain development explains why children like Mr. Manning are four times more likely than adults to falsely confess. Because their brains are not fully developed, children are more susceptible to outside pressure, more impulsive, and less able to weigh consequences than adults.

These findings, coupled with the fact that children are especially capable of positive change as they mature, have led to a series of Supreme Court decisions that limit juvenile life without parole sentences to the rarest of cases. Louisiana prosecutors continue to buck this mandate, according to data from the Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights, which fights to eliminate the practice of sentencing children to die in prison.

Despite the weakness of the evidence used to convict Mr. Manning, it took newly discovered DNA evidence to move his case forward. In an agreement with the Ouachita Parish District Attorney’s Office, Mr. Manning entered an “Alford plea” yesterday to lesser crimes, allowing him to maintain his innocence while accepting the new charges. He was resentenced to time-served for the decades he spent in prison.

Kristin Wenstrom, who has represented Manning for almost a decade at Innocence Project New Orleans and, currently, the Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights, says the result is bittersweet.
“I am thrilled that Gerald’s wrongful incarceration is finally being brought to an end, and that he will soon be reunited with his loving family. Gerald was an innocent child who had his life robbed from him. He deserves to be fully exonerated, but this compromise allowed him to be released today rather than forcing him to wait years in prison while we fight in court.”

Although Mr. Manning leaves Angola today with nothing but the clothes on his back, the plea agreement means he cannot seek compensation from the state for his wrongful incarceration. Those who would like to help him transition from prison to the outside world can donate to his freedom fund or purchase items from his Amazon wishlist.

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The Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights is a nonprofit law office that represents and advocates for children in the justice system, including those sentenced to die in prison. LCCR fights to eliminate juvenile life without parole sentences through policy change, litigation, and direct representation.

Founded in 2001, Innocence Project New Orleans (IPNO) represents innocent, life-sentenced prisoners in Louisiana and Mississippi at no cost to them or their loved ones. IPNO also supports their living well and fully in their world and advocates for sensible criminal justice policies that reduce wrongful convictions.