



INNOCENCE PROJECT OF FLORIDA, INC.

Unlock the Truth

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Willie Williams' Convictions Vacated After 44.5 Years Wrongfully Incarcerated

Relief Granted After Determination by Conviction Integrity Review Investigation that Key Evidence was Not Disclosed Before Trial.

Jacksonville, FL (January 3, 2024) – Today, after almost 48 years since his wrongful conviction, Willie Williams' wrongful attempted murder and robbery convictions were overturned due to the State failing to disclose key evidence that would have undermined the victim's identification—the only evidence against Williams at his trial. This withheld evidence was uncovered by a Conviction Integrity Review (CIR) investigation by Fourth Judicial Circuit State Attorney Melissa Nelson's Office. The State's investigation, led by CIR Director Shelley Thibodeau, led the State to agree to a defense motion to vacate the convictions based on this constitutional violation.

A motion for postconviction relief filed by attorneys for Mr. Williams, Brandon Scheck and Seth Miller of the [Innocence Project of Florida](http://www.innocenceproject.org) (IPF), moved to vacate his judgment and sentence. Fourth Judicial Circuit Judge Lindsay Tygart overturned the attempted murder and robbery convictions for Williams in a short hearing on January 3, 2024, and the State Attorney's Office dropped all charges shortly thereafter. After more than 44 years of wrongful incarceration, Mr. Williams was released from prison on parole in June 2020. He remained on lifetime parole supervision, with the risk of going back to prison, until his wrongful convictions were overturned today.

Mr. Williams said, "it has been more than 48 years since I was originally arrested for this crime. I always knew that I was not the shooter but I didn't have the evidence to properly defend myself. I am so grateful to the State Attorney's Office for diligently reviewing my case and discovering the key evidence to show that I was wrongfully convicted. I also want to thank the Innocence Project of Florida for helping me resolve my case. I am so thankful that I can finally put this injustice behind me and move on with my life."

Upon Mr. Williams contacting the CIR, the CIR initiated a reexamination of the case and began a comprehensive review of Mr. Williams' claim of wrongful conviction in 2021.

Mr. Williams was convicted and sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole in 1976 for the 1975 attempted murder and robbery of two individuals at a Jacksonville produce store. One witness testified at trial that another individual (who committed suicide upon being chased by police) was the shooter and one of the surviving victims could not identify anyone. Despite this evidence pointing away from Williams, the State presented the testimony of the other surviving victim who identified Williams as the shooter in court and from a photo lineup before trial. Based on this, the State's case rested solely on this identification from one of the victims and in closing

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argument the State indicated to the jury that it should believe this identification because the victim would never forget the shooter's face.

Unbeknownst to Mr. Williams or his counsel at the time of trial and contrary to the State's characterization of the strength of the victim's identification, the victim who identified Williams as the shooter did in fact forget his face: the victim was shown an initial photo lineup that included Williams and the alternative suspect and was unable to make an identification. This victim only later made an identification **after being hypnotized**, a method that even at the time had been found to be scientifically unreliable. Neither law enforcement nor prosecutors notified the defense that this critical witness' eventual identification was only procured after the victim was hypnotized.

Upon discovering this critical information that clearly undermined the reliability of the sole evidence used to convict Mr. Williams as the shooter in this case, the CIR immediately disclosed it to Mr. Williams, who retained the Innocence Project of Florida to move to vacate his wrongful convictions based on this non-disclosure. The State has now conceded that this vital evidence was not disclosed to the defense before trial and that this non-disclosure was material such that there is a reasonable probability that this evidence would have resulted in Mr. Williams' acquittal had it been properly disclosed before trial. Upon the court vacating these wrongful convictions, the State has agreed to drop all charges against Mr. Williams related to this case.

IPF Legal Director Brandon Scheck said, "It is important that when it becomes clear that a conviction was procured through unconstitutional means, that all parts of the system—the State, Defense and Court—move swiftly to right that wrongful conviction. We are grateful to the CIR and the senior leadership at the State Attorney's Office for identifying this critical evidence and quickly concluding that its non-disclosure violated Mr. Williams' due process rights, making his conviction and almost 45 years in prison wrongful."

The Innocence Project of Florida (IPF) represented Mr. Williams during this effort. Since 2003, IPF has assisted in overturning the wrongful convictions of 31 innocent individuals who have collectively served more than 691 years for the crimes of others. Located in Tallahassee, IPF's mission is to find and free the innocent in Florida prisons, help these individuals transition back into a changed society, and work to reform the criminal justice system. For more information, visit www.FloridaInnocence.org.

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