

Prosecutors drop conviction, life sentence in 1992 Chicago murders



Deon Patrick is met by his son as he is released from Menard Correctional Center after prosecutors asked a judge to vacate his murder conviction in the "interest of justice." (Zbigniew Bzdak/Chicago Tribune)

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Cook County prosecutors on Friday set aside the murder conviction and life sentence of a Chicago man, half a year after agreeing to free one of his co-defendants in a case that for more than two decades has been clouded by a series of questionable confessions.

Attorneys for Deon Patrick, 42, were disappointed last month when Cook County prosecutors said that they would oppose Patrick's request to have his conviction for a 1992 double murder set aside. Their hopes had been so high they had packed a car with snacks for the long drive to southern Illinois and the Menard Correctional Center to pick up their client.

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...tutors changed course and asked a judge to vacate
...st of justice."

By Friday night, Patrick, who has spent about half his life behind bars, emerged from prison and into the arms of his attorneys, his son and Daniel Taylor, the co-defendant whose conviction was at the heart of the case and who walked free in late June after prosecutors dismissed his case.

"I didn't expect it to happen today," Patrick, his voice ebullient, said after he walked out of Menard. Indeed, he said he had been waiting on court papers from his lawyers when guards pulled him off the prison recreation yard.

"But I feel great right now," he said.

The decision to throw out Patrick's conviction turns attention to two other co-defendants, Lewis Gardner and Paul Phillips. They were convicted as lookouts in the murders and sentenced to 30-year terms. Both have served their time and have been released, but they are hoping to have their convictions set aside as well. Prosecutors have said that they would consider their cases.

The cases stem from the November 1992 murders of Jeffrey Lassiter and Sharon Haugabook, who were shot and killed in an apartment near Clarendon Park on the city's North Side. Taylor, Patrick, Gardner and Phillips were among eight men charged in the murders. All eight confessed and implicated one another, suggesting the cases were inextricably linked and would rise and fall together. No physical evidence linked any of the men to the murders.

Four of the men were alleged to have gone into the apartment; four others were accused of being lookouts. Five of the eight were convicted and imprisoned. Taylor, Patrick and another man, Dennis Mixon, received life sentences. Two of the others had the charges against them dismissed before trial. The eighth was acquitted at trial.

The Tribune investigated Taylor's case in 2001 as part of its series "Cops and Confessions" and uncovered evidence that buttressed Taylor's claim that he was in the lockup at the old Town Hall police station at Addison and Halsted streets when the slayings occurred.

Indeed, according to documents and police officers, he was arrested about two hours before the murders occurred and not released from the lockup until more than an hour after they were committed, making it impossible for him to have taken part and raising questions about all eight of the confessions.

The newspaper also reported that Mixon had admitted committing the crime with other people.

Nonetheless, prosecutors — including both former State's Attorney Dick Devine and his successor, [Anita Alvarez](#) — said they were convinced that Taylor and the others were guilty and opposed Taylor's request to be released.

Alvarez's office changed its position on Taylor last summer, after a federal appeals court gave Taylor hope in a strongly worded ruling and the Illinois attorney general's office said a review of the case file turned up evidence that would have helped his case and, by law, should have been turned over to Taylor's lawyers.

After Taylor's release, Alvarez and her Conviction Integrity Unit launched a review of Patrick's case, interviewing witnesses and others involved in the original investigation and prosecution. That investigation led to the hearing Friday.

What changed between the last hearing, when the prosecutors told Judge Jorge Alonso that they would oppose Patrick's release, and Friday's hearing was unclear.

"This is what we'd been fighting for all along. And we were ready to fight even harder," Nicole Auerbach, one of Patrick's attorneys, said after the hearing. "But this is the right legal decision, and it's the right factual decision. But it came way too late. It's been a long time coming."

Patrick gave a brief confession, in which he said he shot Lassiter, that made up the bulk of the evidence against him at trial. But Taylor said in a lengthy confession, captured by a court reporter, that Patrick shot both Lassiter and Haugabook, a key inconsistency.

The decision to release Patrick suggests police and prosecutors obtained at least seven false confessions. There also were possible problems with the eighth confession, Mixon's.

Mixon's confession, which was the last of the eight and was obtained after police were aware Taylor might have been in the lockup when the crime occurred, contains something none of the others does: a purported explanation of how Taylor could have been involved even though he had been in the lockup that day.

Patrick said he always thought that Taylor's release would pave the way for his own. He figured he might follow six months or so later. Now, he said as he drove back to Chicago, he hoped to spend time with his son, who is 22, and his daughter, 21.

His son, also named Deon, was 11 months old when he was locked up. His son visited often when Patrick was in prisons nearer to Chicago, but that was difficult when Patrick was downstate.

He also said he was frustrated that police and prosecutors seem to escape discipline for the conduct that led to his and Taylor's prison time.

"They think they let us out and it all goes away," he said. "But it's not going to stop unless somebody really does something about all this."

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