

The New York Times

A Murder ‘Solved’ in 4 Hours Sent the Wrong Man to Prison for 23 Years

Grant Williams, whose conviction was overturned on Thursday, told people in prison that they would one day see that he was innocent. “And today’s that day,” he said.



Grant Williams, center, left a Staten Island courthouse with his mother, Cynthia Franklin, left, after a judge vacated his murder conviction on Thursday.

By Jonah E. Bromwich and Arielle Dollinger
July 22, 2021

It was around 6 p.m. on Good Friday in April 1996, and Shdell Lewis was walking with a close friend outside his home in Staten Island when a gunman wearing a black jacket and a Wu-Tang Clan hat walked past, turned around and opened fire. Mr. Lewis was hit several times, collapsed nearby and later died at a hospital.

Within hours, the police had identified Grant Williams, then 25, as his killer.

Mr. Williams was arrested soon after, convicted in 1997 and sentenced to life in prison, where he spent 23 years — all for a crime he did not commit.

On Thursday, a Richmond County judge vacated Mr. Williams’s conviction, after a review of the case identified a number of witnesses who did not testify at the trial, two of whom were essential in proving Mr. Williams’s innocence.

One of those witnesses, the friend walking with Mr. Lewis at the time of the shooting, had told the police that Mr. Williams, whom he knew, was definitely not the shooter. Another witness said he was with Mr. Williams in another location at the time of the shooting.

After the hearing on Thursday, Mr. Williams, who was released from prison on parole in October 2019, said he had always known he would one day be exonerated.

“You never know how much strength you have until it’s tested,” Mr. Williams said. “I never lost strength.”

The exoneration of Mr. Williams follows a string of similar reversals in New York City, which have cast a harsh light on policing and prosecutorial practices that imprisoned innocent people for decades. His arrest and conviction came at a time when the police, struggling to contain New York’s gang wars and a devastatingly high murder rate in the 1990s, could often cut corners in their search for suspects.

In March, a state judge in Queens threw out the convictions of three men who had spent more than two decades in prison after having been wrongfully convicted of a double murder in the late 1990s. In April, the Brooklyn district attorney’s office announced that it would throw out as many as 90 convictions that one police detective had helped secure.

The case against Mr. Williams was thin. Prosecutors did not have a confession, a murder weapon, or any significant evidence apart from the testimony of two eyewitnesses. A police officer who had given chase to the shooter described him as 5-foot-5 and stocky, with a round face. Mr. Williams was 6-foot-2 and thin.

And the district attorney’s reinvestigation found that the police had ignored the witness who told them that Mr. Williams was not the shooter, neither making a record of that interview nor sharing it with prosecutors before they indicted Mr. Williams.

That witness became so frustrated with the process that he declined to respond to investigators working for Mr. Williams’s defense, according to a report filed by the district attorney.

“It’s enraging to read how the investigation unfolded and to see somebody who has lost decades of their life because police manufactured evidence and ignored and buried information that came to them that they had the wrong person,” said Vanessa Potkin, the director of special litigation at the Innocence Project, which seeks the reversal of wrongful convictions. “But cases like Mr. Williams’s are really common.”

Ms. Potkin, whose organization was not involved in Mr. Williams’s exoneration, added that the only thing unusual about the case was that Mr. Williams had been able to obtain proof of his innocence, attract the attention of the district attorney’s office and see his conviction overturned.

“Cases like that of Mr. Williams and the factors that led to his wrongful conviction were ubiquitous in the 1990s,” she said.

In its report, the district attorney's office also noted that the investigation into Mr. Lewis's death came at a time "when New York City was fraught with gang drug turf wars and the murder rate was in the thousands."

"This case was pushed through as 'solved' within four hours and no further investigation or corroboration was sought thereafter," the report said. "This was essentially a 'one witness murder case.'"

The police did not respond to a request for comment on the district attorney's report.

Irving Cohen, Mr. Williams's lawyer for the last seven years, said that it was all too typical for police detectives at that time to stop investigating once they identified a suspect. He said he had handled about 15 similar cases dating to the late 1980s and the 1990s, and that the pressure on investigators to clear cases was often at play.

Back then, if cases like Mr. Williams's were reinvestigated at all, such reviews were usually undertaken on an ad hoc basis by district attorneys responding to claims of innocence from defendants and their lawyers.

But over the past decade, conviction review units like the one that reinvestigated Mr. Williams's case have become far more common, thanks in part to Kenneth P. Thompson, the Brooklyn district attorney between 2014 and 2016, whose office exonerated more than 20 people it found had been wrongfully convicted.

Not all conviction review units, or conviction integrity units, are alike, and some have been criticized for a lack of transparency, for existing "in name only," or for being staffed solely by prosecutors, who do not always have strong incentives to overturn their colleagues' work.

Still, conviction integrity units, as well as pressure from outside organizations like the Innocence Project and others, have led to more exonerations over the past several years.

Many involve trials like Mr. Williams's, where evidence appears to have been scant. Prosecutors at his trial, in November 1997, placed special emphasis on the Wu-Tang hat, noting that Mr. Williams had been employed at the Wu-Tang recording studio. But the Wu-Tang Clan, the most famous rap group from Staten Island, would have been near the height of its popularity that year.

(Later, from prison, Mr. Williams asked that the hat be tested for DNA evidence, but it had been destroyed by the police, as was their standard procedure.)

After deliberating for about a day, the jury said that it was "hopelessly deadlocked." The judge asked that it continue deliberating, a day before the court's Thanksgiving holiday. An hour later, the jury found Mr. Williams guilty of second-degree murder.

More than 8,500 days later, Mr. Williams left the Richmond County courthouse with his head held high. He thanked his family, friends and lawyer for their support and said that he had always known that this day would come.

“There’s a lot of joy in my heart right now,” he said. “I went through a lot of pain.”

He said that in prison, he would often tell others of his innocence.

“I said, ‘I’m telling you the truth, one day you’re going to see me on the news, and they’re going to see that I was innocent,’” he recalled. “And today’s that day.”