



STATEMENT FROM THE OREGON INNOCENCE PROJECT ON THE RELEASE OF OUR FORMER CLIENT JESSE JOHNSON

“For 25 years, the State of Oregon has fought to defend their deeply flawed case against our former client, Jesse Johnson. The tunnel vision they displayed in Mr. Johnson’s case could have led to them executing an innocent man. There can be no more heinous injustice imaginable than for Mr. Johnson to have heard a sentence of death pronounced against him all those years ago in Marion County and to then waste away for years on death row. The death penalty is just one of the grave dangers to which wrongful conviction exposes Oregonians.

Our organization became involved in Jesse Johnson’s case back in 2014 and represented him until October 2021 when the Oregon Court of Appeals overturned his conviction and death sentence. We supported the transition to the trial team and continued to provide input when requested. What we learned about this case during our extensive investigation and examination of what happened should appall every Oregonian who cares about fairness and justice. We encountered a district attorney’s office that was more concerned with protecting its own reputation than with uncovering the truth. We met with strong resistance from the DA and the Attorney General to further DNA testing of evidence from the crime scene that might have shed light on what really happened to Sunny Thompson. Why would the state not want to learn what DNA could have told us about that night in March 1998? On top of the already slim evidence that connected Jesse to Ms. Thompson, there were clear and unambiguous statements of racism by a detective involved in the case who discouraged a neighbor from sharing that she witnessed a white man running away from the scene on the night of the murder because, as he regarded it: “A n— died, a n— is going to pay for it.” We uncovered the identity of a new witness in the case through testing of Ms. Thompson’s vaginal swabs, an individual police could have found years earlier. The Oregon Innocence Project alongside many others played a key role in digging into the facts of what happened and helping to bring to light the numerous flaws in Mr. Johnson’s case.

Belatedly, after twenty-five years, the Marion County District Attorney’s Office has done the minimum it could in dismissing the charges. Oregonians deserve answers as does Mr. Johnson about what really happened here. We need answers to many questions in this case, including questions of racism as evidenced by the detective’s remarks to the neighbor witness. We cannot ignore that for so many years, the State ruthlessly pursued the execution of Mr. Johnson only to abandon their case against him and we must know the truth.

Jesse Johnson walked out of jail last night a free man but has been left with absolutely nothing by the State of Oregon. He didn’t even get the paltry amount of gate money that someone would

usually get when released because the dismissal of his case means he isn't entitled to it. No resources, no support. We need the community to rally round Mr. Johnson now."

Statement to be attributed to Steve Wax, Legal Director, Oregon Innocence Project.

The Oregon Innocence Project respectfully requests that you do not use the shorthand "Innocence Project" to refer to our organization because that is the name of another innocence organization based in New York.