

## He helps innocent prisoners win their freedom

Through his Centurion Ministries, Jim McCloskey works to overturn unjust sentences.



The advocacy work of Jim McCloskey has helped overturn 44 wrongful convictions to date. A seminary graduate, he says that only one group is more persistent than he and his staff: mothers of the accused.

Ann Hermes/Special to The Christian Science Monitor

By Marilyn Jones, Correspondent / November 30, 2009  
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Jim McCloskey has spent the past 30 years in and out of prisons. His offices at Centurion Ministries in Princeton, N.J., show why: The pictures and newspaper articles covering the walls tell one story after another of Mr. McCloskey's tireless work to free innocent men and women from life sentences or death row.

But McCloskey says it took a couple of detours until he finally found, as he puts it, "a life of authenticity – what I think of as a calling."

After graduating from Bucknell University and a three-year stint in the US Navy (where he was awarded the Bronze Star for valor), McCloskey began to climb the corporate ladder.

But after 13 years, even though he'd achieved success, he felt unfulfilled. So, at the age of 37, he surprised his friends and family by entering Princeton Theological Seminary to become an ordained Presbyterian minister.

In his second year at seminary, McCloskey served as a student chaplain at Trenton (N.J.) State Prison. Ministering to dozens of inmates, he heard many stories of woe and regret. But one inmate in particular, Jorge de los Santos, convicted of murder and serving a life sentence, made a deep impression.

"His cries of innocence haunted me," McCloskey says. "And he challenged me to do something." After spending some long nights of soul-searching, McCloskey made another life-changing decision. Convinced of Mr. de los Santos's sincerity, he withdrew from seminary for a full year to devote himself to proving de los Santos's innocence.

Living on his savings, McCloskey dug in. And his work paid off. Through persistence, he uncovered duplicity in the testimony of the star witness – another inmate incarcerated with de los Santos at the local county jail, ironically similarly named Delli Santi (of the saints).

"Neither of them were saints," McCloskey says with a laugh. But "while Jorge was a drug addict, he wasn't a murderer."

In his research on the case, McCloskey discovered a deal between the witness and the district attorney's office that the jury had never heard about. McCloskey's diligence led to Delli Santi's admission that he had falsely accused Jorge to avoid prison time.

At the time of the trial, the witness, Delli Santi, walked out of jail immediately after testifying falsely. And de los Santos went to prison. Even the judge in the appeals court concurred that this case had serious flaws. He remarked that the jailhouse testimony "reeked of perjury and the prosecutor knew it."

De los Santos's conviction was overturned – and an innocent man walked out of prison after seven years of wrongful incarceration. His cries had, indeed, been heard.

With that victory, McCloskey knew he had found his calling. He returned to seminary and completed his degree. But rather than becoming an ordained minister, he decided to dedicate his life to serving the unjustly imprisoned. With a \$10,000 gift (and moral support) from his parents, he founded Centurion Ministries in 1983. Inspired by his Christian faith, he named his organization after the Roman centurion who stood at Jesus' cross and declared, "Surely this one is innocent."

Centurion Ministries has remained, according to McCloskey, a small "mom and pop" organization. He and his staff undertake a rigorous process to decide whether to accept a case – let alone bring it to completion.

To date, 42 wrongly convicted men and two wrongly convicted women have walked free because of the exhaustive work of Centurion's staff.

Today McCloskey serves as executive director. Kate Hill Germond, Centurion's director, comanages Centurion and also works as an investigator and advocate.

Centurion's full-time investigator, Paul Henderson, a former investigative reporter for The Seattle Times, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for a series of articles that vindicated a man who had been falsely convicted of rape. Mr. Henderson later became a professional investigator. He joined Centurion in 1996.

With only two other paid staff positions, the small team relies on the generous research, legwork, and financial donations of countless volunteers and other supporters, including attorneys.

McCloskey laments that many people still sit in prisons wrongly convicted, people his small group can't help.

"We just don't have the resources," he says.

The tedious work of reading through every document, report, and phone message, as well as reinterviewing witnesses or interviewing new ones, and sorting through all the evidence from cases tried years ago, means that each case takes years to pursue and requires uncommon tenacity.

Other human rights groups may have a higher public profile than Centurion, but, as famed attorney Barry Scheck of the Innocence Project (which seeks to exonerate innocent prisoners through DNA testing) commented last year: "Both Jim and Kate are a national resource."

Richard Miles, an inmate released in October 2009 from a life sentence for murder for which he was wrongly convicted, couldn't agree more.

"To me," he says, "Jim McCloskey may not be the man you hear about. But he's the one who does the work and pulls back the curtain so the world can see an individual's innocence."

McCloskey and his team not only work to free innocent prisoners: They help them reenter society once they're released.

Centurion becomes fully invested in those it advocates for, knowing well the nightmare these individuals have lived through – whether they are innocent victims of tragic injustice, mistaken identification, corruption, laziness, or indifference.

McCloskey says his commitment and that of his staff is surpassed by only one other group, who persists in advocating for the innocent.

"It's the mothers," he says. "They're the ones who really never give up. They never give up on their sons."