

The Times

Six exonerated men rejoice in Princeton Twp.

Centurion Ministries thanked for hard work to free them

PRINCETON TOWNSHIP -- Johnny Briscoe was close to doing what he swore to his family he'd never do.

After nearly 24 years behind bars for a rape he did not commit, the 54-year-old Missouri man was planning to apologize at his upcoming parole hearing in the hope that board members would consider him rehabilitated and finally release him.

"I was stepping over my morals and my principles to admit to a crime I didn't commit, but after 20 some years in prison, I was tired. I couldn't do it another year," said Briscoe, whose protests of innocence had resulted in several parole denials over the years. "They wanted me to show remorse. I saw it as my only way out."

But two months before his hearing, Briscoe got astounding news. A cigarette butt recovered from the crime scene -- a piece of evidence that a Princeton Township group fighting for his release had been seeking for years -- had turned up in a county freezer undergoing repair work. The DNA data gleaned from the cigarette exonerated Briscoe. Within days he was a free man.

"I guess God didn't see it fitting for me to apologize for something I didn't do," Briscoe said. "I feel like a soldier honorably discharged from Iraq. I commend the Centurion Ministries for their efforts and their diligent work in getting St. Louis County to turn over that evidence."

A jubilant Briscoe was one of six men from across the country who gathered at Centurion Ministries yesterday to celebrate their release and thank the nonprofit agency for its work in freeing them.

One by one, as their grateful families looked on, the men removed their names and case information from a bulletin board in the cramped Centurion office on Witherspoon Street.

"Free at last," Briscoe cried as he dropped the black plastic letters of his name into a plastic bucket at his feet.

Yesterday's ceremonial name purging, followed by a picnic at founder Jim McCloskey's home, brought the six men and their families face to face with some of the people who toiled for years to convince courts from California to New York they had punished the wrong men.

"They're doing God's work," said Jessie Burnley, Briscoe's sister. "If there were more people like Jim and Centurion Ministries in the world, it would be a better place."

Since its inception in 1983, the Princeton Township-based group nationally acclaimed for its pursuit of justice has won freedom for 43 people.

Among them is Willie Earl Green, a former chauffeur who spent 25 years in a California prison for a murder he did not commit.

His conviction was overturned last March when a Los Angeles judge concluded that the prosecution's star witness lied.

As McCloskey recounted the circumstances of Green's case before the families yesterday, Green interjected with the exact dates of when he first met with McCloskey.

"It was February 3, on a Friday," Green said matter of factly.

"What time?" McCloskey joked.

"About 12," Green retorted without missing a beat.

Green was five years into his life sentence when he learned about Centurion Ministries while watching a 60 Minutes episode about another inmate's release.

"I had a dream a guy was going to get me out of prison," Green said. "When I saw (McCloskey) on television I said 'That's him. That's the guy who's going to get me out of prison.' That's the only way I'll get out."

Green reached out to McCloskey, who flew to California to meet him. But McCloskey brought bad news. The organization, which consists of five full-time employees assisted by local volunteers and a national network of attorneys and forensics experts, was too busy to take his case. Green would have to wait.

"It was the saddest day of my life," Green recalled. "It was like I was convicted all over again. But I knew I had to hold on and have faith."

Centurion Ministries eventually took Green's case in 2003, and after four years of intervention, Green was released, more than eight years ahead of his first tentative parole hearing.

"They're sent from God," Green said yesterday. "They're angels. I guess they hide their wings."

Other freed prisoners whose releases were celebrated yesterday were Darryl Burton, released last month after serving 24 years for a St. Louis murder he did not commit; Harry Granger and David Alexander, released in 2006 after 30 years of false imprisonment for a Louisiana murder; and Marcus Washington and Herbert Sims, boyhood friends and co-defendants who spent nearly 30 years in prison after being wrongfully convicted of a New York City murder.

Both men have been paroled, based in part on the case made by Centurion Ministries. But McCloskey won't be satisfied until their convictions are overturned. Until then, the men have opted to leave their names on the board.

"We'd rather wait," Washington said.

Washington's sister, Bettie Storey, said her family has prayed for her brother's exoneration. She hopes to someday raise funds for Centurion Ministries to show her thanks.

"With more funding, they'll be able to expand what they're doing and take more cases," she said.

Like all the freed men interviewed yesterday, Washington, 48, expressed little anger over his ordeal.

"I went into prison as a young kid, and I was angry and bitter," he said. "But I met some older guys who taught me that the bitterness and anger was only going to hurt me."

McCloskey said falsely convicted men are able to weather their time in prison by clinging to the knowledge

that they are innocent.

"The truth is their gold. It is their buried treasure," he said. "It's what they stand on. The whole world is wrong in believing that they're guilty, but they know they're innocent. That gives them strength and hope. They believe that somehow, someday the truth will emerge and set them free."

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