

Clinic Helps Free Man Wrongfully Imprisoned for 36 Years

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(l-r) California Innocence Project Director Justin Brooks, Michael Hanline, and Innocence Project director of litigation Alex Simpson

Michael Hanline is poised to spend his first Thanksgiving outside of prison in 36 years.

The longest-serving California inmate found to have been wrongfully convicted, Hanline was released on Nov. 24 after prosecutors owned up to numerous problems with the 1978 murder case against him.

Hanline, 69, is the first of the so-called “California 12” to be freed. The California Innocence Project identified the dozen inmates, including Hanline, as serving time despite strong evidence of their innocence, but who exhausted their legal options seeking release.

Lawyers in the project, which is a legal clinic housed at the California Western School of Law in San Diego, have been probing the case against Hanline since 1999. They recently uncovered new DNA evidence that cast doubt on Hanline’s guilt and also found that prosecutors had withheld documents pointing to other potential perpetrators.

“I always hoped this day would come, but I can’t believe that it’s happening today,” Hanline said in a statement delivered to media gathered outside the jail in Ventura County, Calif., when he was released. “I’m very happy to be standing here with my wife Sandee who has stood by me all the years. I especially want to thank the California Innocence Project. They have stood by me for 15 years fighting for my freedom. I’m so grateful to them for everything they have done for me and for other wrongfully convicted men and women.”

Hanline was convicted of the 1978 murder of his friend J.T. McGarry and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Prosecutors alleged that Hanline and an accomplice shot McGarry and dumped his body in nearby Ojai, Calif., because both he and the victim were involved with the same woman. That woman implicated Hanline during the 1980 trial but also testified that she had used drugs the night McGarry was killed. Hanline maintained that others were responsible for the murder.

In addition to new DNA evidence that did not match the crime, lawyers with the California Innocence Project found police reports implicating other suspects—reports that were sealed and not admitted during Hanline’s trial.

A U.S. magistrate judge in 2010 reviewed the case and recommended that Hanline’s conviction be overturned, but a federal district court judge did not take up the recommendation.

Hanline’s release came two weeks after the Ventura County District Attorney’s Office filed court documents acknowledging that the case against him had problems and that other people had motives to kill McGarry. A California Superior Court Judge approved his release on \$2,500 bail and a requirement that he wear an ankle monitor until he is due back in court in February.

Hanline is the 13th client of the California Innocence Project to be freed since the program’s founding in 1999. Through the project, law students spend a year reviewing innocence claims and assisting in litigation.

“It’s amazing that Mike will finally be released after 36 years of wrongful incarceration,” said California Innocence Project Director Justin Brooks. “It’s time for the rest of the California 12 to go home as well.”

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