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Freed after 26 years, victim of faulty testimony feels 'amazing'



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Larry D. Smith's first order of business after giving his mother and daughter huge hugs was to make his way to his favorite Coney Island restaurant in search of chili fries and his other favorite foods.

Smith, 45, of Detroit got his first taste of freedom in 26 years Thursday as he was released from a Michigan prison for a murder he and his attorney say he didn't commit.

"I feel absolutely great. Amazing," he said as he made his way back to Detroit from the Adrian Correctional Facility. "This is a wonderful feeling."

Sitting inside D's Coney Island on Schaefer, Smith had a joyful reunion with his daughter Eakira Bullard, who was a toddler when her father was sent to prison.

"I just feel blessed he's finally free," said Bullard, who's 28.

"What's the first thing you felt when you saw me today?" she asked her father. He replied, "Superduper!"

Smith was 18 when he was sentenced in November 1994 to life in prison without the possibility of parole for first-degree murder and felony firearm convictions.

Smith's conviction was overturned as a result of an investigation by the Wayne County Prosecutor Office's Conviction Integrity Unit, headed by director Valerie Newman. Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Shannon Walker signed an order that allowed the case against Smith to be dismissed and for him to be released from prison.

"After 26 years of wrongful imprisonment, justice has finally been done, due to the incredible work of the Conviction Integrity Unit," said Mary Owens, Smith's attorney. "Larry finally has his life back."

Smith's mother, Debra Smith, who went to the prison to greet her son as he was released, told The News Thursday: "God is good all the time. I had faith. I never gave up."

Smith, who said he was stricken with COVID-19 in December, said he wants to go back to school to become a criminologist and help others behind bars he says were wrongfully put there. Many are now aged prisoners and, in a lot of cases, in failing health, he said, and others have fallen victim to the coronavirus and died.

Smith was convicted in connection with the slaying of Kenneth Hayes in the early morning hours of March 24, 1994, at a location in the 2200 block of Annabelle in Detroit.

During Smith's trial, the sole eyewitness who testified described the gait and body shape of a person who ran from the scene. No testimony established that Smith had a distinctive walk or build.

There also was no conclusive forensic evidence that linked Smith to the crime. A jailhouse informant testified that Smith had confessed to committing the slaying to him; the prosecutor's office said the informant's testimony was later discredited because it may have been "fabricated" to gain favors from police in his own case.

Smith denied making a confession to the informant and "has always maintained his innocence," according to the prosecutor.

"After a thorough review of the investigation and evidence in this case, we have determined that Mr. Smith certainly is entitled to a new trial," Worthy said in a statement Wednesday. "We found that the Detroit Police Department's informant was unreliable as well as the testimony of a key witness.

"There were other issues as well," she said. "While we cannot state that this is an exoneration, we are very certain that the trial process was not just."

Worthy's office said Smith will not be tried because of the "passage of time" since the first trial.

Civil rights attorney Wolfgang Mueller, who has represented individuals who were exonerated of wrongful murder convictions following an investigation by the prosecutor's Integrity Conviction Unit, said Wednesday: "Thanks to the CIU for exposing the notorious DPD jailhouse snitch witness program and the police misconduct that caused another innocent man to be framed and lose his freedom for his entire adult life. These officers will be held accountable for the harm they've caused."

Daniel Mears contributed.