

February 2023

In Memoriam Bill Amor



Angel and Bill, on Angel's birthday in August

Our beloved and longtime client Bill Amor unexpectedly died last month, just five years after he was exonerated. He was 66.

Bill may not have been sentenced to death but the many years of neglect and punishment he endured wrongfully imprisoned for 22 years was in effect a death sentence. What happened to him is representative of the unseen tragedy innocent clients face as a result of their wrongful convictions.

Bill was wrongfully convicted in 1997 of arson-murder after his mother-in-law died in an apartment fire. He was released when a judge reversed his conviction based on advances in fire science that showed it would have been

“scientifically impossible” for the fire to start the way the State argued.

Despite that evidence, the State chose to retry Bill. The eight months’ wait for retrial was excruciating for Bill and everyone who loved him. His eventual victory – full exoneration after the judge called the State’s theory “fatally compromised” – should have signaled a new beginning for Bill’s life.

But the stress of wrongful conviction and imprisonment, fighting to prove his innocence for 22 years, receiving little to no medical care in prison for ongoing health issues, and trying to rebuild his life with virtually nothing took an irreversible toll on Bill’s health. He never really recovered.

There exists the misperception that exonerated people walk out of prison to millions of dollars. But Bill is an example of what is much more common – struggling to make ends meet and find quality of life.

Like so many of the wrongfully convicted, Bill walked out without a dime to his name and nowhere to go. Angel Gonzalez, one of our clients who had been exonerated and released just two years before, offered his couch. Angel's home and family soon became Bill's. Their acquaintanceship became a friendship and then a brotherhood.

Bill tried but was unable to build financial security. At the time of his death he was still fighting to obtain a Certificate of Innocence, which would have enabled him to receive compensation for his wrongful conviction. He did not receive a civil award. As Bill's health declined, Angel continued to care for him like a brother.

Bill's case was the first of its kind in Illinois in which a court found that advancements in fire science constitute newly discovered evidence of actual innocence. In addition to IIP's Lauren Kaeseberg, Bill's legal team included: Erica Nichols Cook, director of the Wrongful Conviction Division for the Iowa State Public Defender, who continued to work on his case pro bono after leaving IIP; Tara Thompson, then an attorney with the Exoneration Project in Chicago and now a senior staff attorney at the Innocence Project; Lauren Myerscough-Mueller, then of IIP and now an attorney at the Exoneration Project; and Kevin Caraher, of the law firm Cozen O'Connor. Over the years, numerous IIP students and staff worked on Bill's case, and provided support and friendship to him.

We weren't ready to say goodbye to Bill. But his fighting spirit remains, woven into the fabric of the Illinois Innocence Project.