

Innocence Redeemed: Former Convicted Murderer Tells Story of Exoneration

Sr. Grace Walle, F.M.I.

They say, “Everybody has a story to tell,” but Michael Morton’s story took a dramatic turn from his otherwise ordinary life to become front page news – sadly, because of being accused of killing his wife in 1986. I recently heard his story at Law Day in San Antonio, Texas. Law Day is an event sponsored by the San Antonio Bar Association celebrating the Constitution and Rule of Law. The annual event gathers area judges, attorneys, and other members of the legal community for awards and a presentation by a nationally recognized speaker on a topic of interest to the legal community. As the chaplain for St. Mary’s School of Law, I annually attend because I am involved in receiving a donation from the San Antonio Bar Association and the Bexar County Women’s Bar Association. The grant supports St. Mary’s law students’ pro bono activities.



Mike Morton, Sr. Grace Walle,
and Gerry Goldstein JD

While I was in line to register for this event, I turned around and was surprised to see Mike Morton and his wife, whom he recently married, standing behind me. If you did not know who he was, you would have thought he was one of the many lawyers at the celebration. However, I recognized him as the man exonerated from prison as a result of his CNN and 60 Minutes interviews and author of “Getting Life: An Innocent Man’s 25-Year Journey from Prison to Peace.” After chatting with him briefly, I told him of my involvement at St. Mary’s School of Law and that I was also a member of the Marianist Anti-Death Penalty and Restorative Justice Committee. I thanked him for his attendance and looked forward to hearing his presentation.

After opening event proceedings, Morton was introduced by Gerry Goldstein, J.D., a defense attorney in San Antonio. In a calm and clear voice, Morton told his story indicating his life had been as ordinary as most people in the audience. At the time of the arrest, he lived in a suburb of Austin, was a supermarket manager, with a beautiful, loving wife and young child. Then one day in 1986, he returned home to find his wife had been brutally attacked and murdered. The rest of the story unravels, as if a plot in a TV movie. While there was no evidence of his blood, or obvious motive, the circumstantial evidence included a note left on the bathroom mirror expressing his feelings of rejection and disappointment regarding the previous night’s birthday celebration and Morton’s seeming lack of emotion. And since there was no other apparent suspect, the Williamson County prosecutor immediately pegged Morton as the top suspect. Morton protested he did not commit the crime and the defense attorney tried to prove another person could have entered the house, since his three year old son told the story of the monster who came to the house. In addition, evidence of a bloody bandana was not fully tested for DNA. The defense lost the case and subsequently, Morton was sentenced to life imprisonment.

A time of deep sadness and loss of hope prevailed for Morton. In isolation, he spent many hours conjuring opportunities for revenge on those who put him in jail. His family distanced

themselves from him and his son eventually stopped visiting because of the pain it caused. At first, I thought this was a very beneficial story for lawyers to hear about the far-reaching impact of wrongful convictions.

With the same calm and gentle voice, it also became a story of forgiveness, redemption, and the power of God's intervention in Morton's life. Morton, who considered himself not particularly religious, describes the events of the night he received a clear sensation of God's presence and felt a bright light come over him. Little by little, he described his conversion and eventual transition from seeking revenge to seeking peace and forgiveness for those who falsely condemned him. It took 10 years after his spiritual conversion and a total of 25 years of imprisonment until he was officially exonerated on Dec. 19, 2011.

In 2005, thanks to the Innocence Project and the law firm Raley & Bowick LLP, Texas Courts of Appeals granted a motion requesting additional DNA evidence of a bandana found at the scene. The unknown male DNA profile was run through the FBI's Combined DNA Index System and matched Mark Norwood, a convicted felon from California, who had a criminal record in Texas and who lived in Texas at the time of Christine Morton's murder. Further investigation by Morton's lawyers and the Travis County District Attorney revealed that a hair from Norwood was also found at the scene of the murder of Debra Masters Baker in Travis County.

In addition, a former Texas prosecutor and judge, Ken Anderson, pled guilty to intentionally failing to disclose evidence. When trying the case as a prosecutor, Anderson possessed evidence that may have cleared Morton including statements from the crime's only eyewitness that Morton was not the attacker. Anderson sat on this evidence and then watched as a jury convicted Morton. Anderson resigned from the bench and lost his law license. Morton continues speaking engagements in churches and other venues around the country testifying to the redemptive power of God in his life. He has worked to renew relationships with family and friends and recently married his supportive wife.

As I listened to Morton's story, I realized he had an even deeper message for this Law Day that went directly to the heart of my reason for participation with the MSJC Anti-Death Penalty and Restorative Justice Team and my work as a law school chaplain. Morton's is one of many, many stories I have heard of when flawed human beings abuse the justice system and falsely convict people. While there are many good, ethical attorneys and judges who help keep our society safe from those who would harm us, Morton's story sheds light on the many broken pieces in our justice system that impact hundreds of thousands of Americans. In order to uphold our shared values of rehabilitation, redemption, and fairness, these deeply rooted problems demand reform.

On July 9, 2016 I attended the Texas Court Reporters Association Convention to lead an invocation and Mike Morton was the speaker for their gathering. It again gave me the opportunity to hear his story but also to pray in the name of all involved in anti-death penalty and restorative justice efforts.