



Together again. Wiley Bridgeman (left), Kwame Ajamu (center) and Ricky Jackson (right).

## Good Kids, Bad City

After 39 Years of wrongful incarceration,  
Ricky Jackson and the Bridgeman brothers walk free

By Kyle Swenson | 3 Dec 2014 | p. 13

**BEFORE THEY THREW** him in chains, he was a gutsy kid with wandering feet.

The Cleveland Museum of Art was a favorite roaming ground. He'd go alone. He was only 6 or so. The columned landmark was a short walk from where his family stayed back then in the '60s. Entry was free, so Ricky Jackson's shoes would squeak for hours down the marble hallways hung with gloomy Dutch masters and sun-washed Monets. The solo tours always stopped in the Armor Court, at the knight on horseback, the little boy's neck craning up to gaze at the polished armor. Here was a whole new world — a real-life magical one, even — as strange as the far-flung places on *Star Trek*, the show his stepfather always had on the family TV.

He'd kick around the neighboring streets too. With a couple pennies, he'd jump on the bus and go as far as the pocket change took him. Got lost a few times, sure. But as long as the bus didn't

take too many turns, Ricky knew he could just cross the street to the other stop and start going back the way he'd come.

His family — mom and stepdad, two brothers and a sister — moved too, jumping from house to house. In '66, they were staying off Hough when the riots tore a hole through the city. Ricky watched clouds of tear gas crawl down the block while National Guardsmen clubbed parents trying to get their kids inside. A neighbor leaning out the window to call her children home was shot in the head. His mom and stepdad were arrested in the scramble. The fires went out but the same tension brewed.

Later they moved south to Arthur Avenue. One house down was a family with a son around Ricky's age, a young, round-headed kid so tiny everyone called him Bitzie, as in itsey bitsy. Folks called Bitzie's brother, Wiley, "Buddy." By the time they were teenagers, the trio were inseparable, playing chess and tooling around in



*Kwame Ajamu and his wife LaShawn.*

Buddy's white 1971 Sebring, Grand Funk Railroad and Three Dog Night spilling from the radio, their fingers riffing air guitar.

Ricky was then punching in regularly at a restaurant downtown. He liked the work. Bitzie was doing shifts as a porter, and he'd just gotten his training in welding. Wiley was in the National Guard and working at a clothing store. They were good kids easing into that age when you start to figure it all out.

More than four decades are stacked up between then and now, but Ricky Jackson still has those memories, sharp as snapshots. "Once your life gets cut abruptly like that, you're frozen in that moment," Ricky says, now 57 years old. "You always remember that time vividly because that's where your life stopped."

That life came to a quick close with three swift slams of the gavel in the fall of 1975. Ricky, along with Bitzie and Buddy — brothers Ronnie and Wiley Bridgeman — were sentenced to death for murder. A white money-order salesman had been robbed and shot at their neighborhood corner store. The police said Ronnie and Ricky beat the man before Ricky pulled the trigger. Wiley was the getaway driver. No physical evidence linked the defendants to the crime. But police had a witness — a 13-year-old boy named Edward Vernon who claimed to have seen it all. All at once, Ricky, Ronnie and Wiley became strings of digits on a jailer's list: 144061, 143953 and 143810, respectively. They were 18, 17 and 20 years old.

The catch was that they were innocent. It would take nearly 40 years to prove that fact.

**THE PAST HIT** Edward Vernon at once like a falling anvil. He was manning the front desk at the City Mission back in November 2001, checking IDs on the homeless men shuffling in for a hot meal. The mindless workflow broke when he caught pieces of a conversation near the door — a stranger was explaining he'd just paroled out after 25 years for a 1975 murder he didn't commit. The round man soon slapped his ID on the desk. Vernon stared at the

name.

Wiley Bridgeman.

By 2001, Vernon's life was leveling out after his own stumbles, adult years clouded by cocaine and marijuana, a 1991 arrest for gross sexual imposition, jail time for a 1996 drug bust. That was behind him now. And here was Wiley, one of the three he'd sent to prison, paroled to the City Mission a quarter century later.

A day after the chance meeting, Vernon approached Wiley in a group therapy session, tears blubbering. The men talked. Wiley told Vernon they should go to a TV news station. Surely the news would want to hear what they'd been up to since 1975. Vernon wasn't so sure. A day later, he told his supervisor Wiley was the defendant in a murder case he'd testified in. He'd keep his distance afterward, and Wiley would soon move on — he moved to his own apartment shortly after seeing Vernon — and his taste of the outside world would end soon. After an argument with his parole officer in early 2002, he went back to prison.

As far as Vernon was concerned, the door had swung shut on the past once again. But the chance meeting would be the first strange twist that would eventually unravel everything.

**HOME WAS THE** last place he wanted to land. Ronnie Bridgeman paroled out in 2003, missing Wiley by a year. He asked the state to ship him off to halfway houses in Canton or Columbus. In the end, they dumped him back in the 216.

"Cleveland was no longer my town," he explained recently. "It represented everything that was ugly and hurtful. It had nothing to do with the people I knew per se, but it was the people who were supposed to protect and serve. They ruined it for me. I wanted to get out of here from the word 'go'."

He was literally trying to re-start himself. Inside he'd converted to Islam. In 1995, he changed his name to Kwame Ajamu. "I decided Ronnie Bridgeman should be left there in prison," he says. Returning home made that hard. "Everyday of my life it seemed like I would run into someone from my past, someone who knew Ronnie Bridgeman but who didn't know Kwame Ajamu."

Still, he pieced together his own life. He learned to gut through emotional bends that come when you re-acclimate in society: learning the pay for the bus again; getting used to seeing the 5-year-old niece you once knew as a grown woman with her own kids. He met a beautiful woman named LaShawn; they got married in 2004. He got steady work at the County Board of Elections. The new life was good but the past was constantly tugging at him. Every old neighborhood pal who greeted him as Ronnie reminded him.

"For a long time, I just felt like I had abandoned those guys just because they had let me out," Kwame told me recently. He never

forgot about the guys still inside, and resolved to do what he could from the outside. "It was killing me, man. That motivated me everyday."

**REPORTERS ARE ALWAYS** hearing, "I didn't do it." Every week, there are phone calls, jailhouse letters, emails from family and friends — all professing how somebody was railroaded for a crime they didn't commit. Truth is, most of the claims are bogus, late in the game Hail Marys that cook up excuses and point fingers.

That wasn't the case with Kwame.

As the years dragged on, he spoke to lawyers about the possibility of mounting a legal challenge to the convictions. Lawyers, however, cost money. Reporters don't. But the news people Kwame first contacted all ignored him. The frustration mounted until finally a lawyer connected him with me in 2010. We met at a downtown coffee shop. He was sitting with thousands of pages of court documents in a neat stack.

Kwame was stocky and bearded and the sort of man whose words roll out slow and deliberate with a slight streetcat flavor to his phrasing. You expect anger from someone who'd been put away for nothing, a guy putting his fist through every wall in sight. But Kwame had metabolized the injustice by then. The pain and suffering seemed to have dug deeper dimensions into his soul; he was remarkably emphatic, even toward the person responsible for their conviction. "He was just a kid then," he said sympathetically of Edward Vernon's role in his life.

As Kwame explained it, the testimony that led to the convictions went as follows: On May 19, 1975, Vernon claimed he'd left school early and boarded a city bus for home. When he arrived, he saw Ricky and Ronnie struggling with a white man named Harold Franks outside the Fairmount Cut-Rate, at Stokes Boulevard and Petrarca Road. They splashed the salesman with acid and beat him with a pipe. Ricky then shot the man twice. The two then sped off in a green car, which Vernon said he'd seen Wiley driving earlier.

All lies, Kwame told me. On the day of the crime, Kwame and Ricky had spent the late morning wandering the neighborhood, playing pickup basketball in a park before heading to the Bridgemans' house. Wiley was out front washing his car. They spent the afternoon swapping pieces over a chessboard until word began spreading through the neighborhood that there was trouble at the corner store. Something about a white man getting killed. The teens walked up to see what was going on.

The key to the case, Kwame told me, was Vernon's testimony in the three separate trials. Each contained glaring inconsistencies and errors. Sometimes what Vernon testified to was physically impossible. It proved he couldn't have seen what he said he saw.

Six months of reporting largely substantiated Kwame's claims.

I pored through thousands of pages of transcripts and old police documents. Kwame and I tracked down old neighbors and friends, springing loose old memories about the day of the crime.

We found witnesses who claimed they were with Vernon when he was supposedly witnessing the crime. Others remembered being with the Bridgemans and Ricky at the very time they were allegedly robbing the Cut-Rate and pumping bullets into Harry Franks. None of these people had been approached by police during the original investigation. Then again, none of them had volunteered the information.

In the end, the reporting showed clearly that three innocent men had been shipped to death row based on the improbable and inconsistent testimony of the then 12-year-old. Vernon himself, however, wasn't interested in circling back on the subject.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's a done deal," Vernon told me for the June 8, 2011 story, after I finally managed to track him down through his church.

The months of work built to the day of publication. Then, nothing. No public outcry or court orders. A couple of good-jobs and tough-lucks. We'd swung with everything we had. But Ricky and Wiley were still inside.

"It actually crushed me," Kwame said.

**THE EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN** Center is a beige pitch-roofed building on the north bank of Superior in the East 80s, one of the rare steady pulses of life in the surrounding gutted blocks. Edward Vernon has bowed his head here on Sundays for the past six years.

Pastor Anthony Singleton, a lanky and dapper-dressing man of God, likes to park himself right in the daily lives of his 200 or so parishioners. So as soon as Vernon began attending the church, Singleton struck up a relationship. To the pastor, here was a man of high-voltage faith. Drink, smoke, and vulgarity never passed by Vernon's lips. He knew his scriptures. He was dedicated to the church, ministering to shut-ins and participating in services. Still,

*The scene of the crime on May 19, 1975.*





*Fairmount Cut-Rate on the day of the crime.*

Singleton felt there was something out of step. "There was always this black cloud over him," Singleton told me.

From his pulpit, Singleton preached that if you stayed tight to God's path, you'd be awarded good fortune. But bad luck dogged Vernon. He'd have a good job working security at a hospital, then get fired, no questions. On Sunday, during service, a repo truck would come up to haul off his car. When Vernon found work again, it was for a laundry where the boss sometimes didn't even pay him. "In a two-year period, he lost like two cars and three jobs," Singleton said. "I'm just saying to myself, 'This is not making any sense.'"

Then there was the crying. Vernon often burst into tears during services. And throughout the year, Singleton held shut-ins for the congregation's men, intense all-nighters of spiritual searching. Many an eye flooded after confessing sins or talking faith. But Vernon wept dusk to dawn, the sanctuary filled with his howling peals.

Singleton's first clue to whatever was on lockdown in Vernon's psyche came in early 2011. One day he happened to grab the ringing phone in the church's office. I was on the other end, asking if he could put me in touch with Vernon. I didn't go into details about why I was looking to talk with him. A cautious Singleton said he'd relay the message. But he was curious about why a reporter was trying to speak with Vernon. When he asked him about it, Vernon brushed it off, said it was only something about the City Mission.

Months later, after the story appeared, Singleton called me again,

asking for a copy of the article. I mailed one off. "I looked it over," he told me recently. "Then I did my own research. I went on the Internet, I went downtown, I went to the library. I gathered all this information because I thought maybe this is it right here."

But when the pastor tried to nudge Vernon into talking about 1975, he refused, walling off the subject completely. Singleton was stuck on the outside of Vernon's defenses. He was Vernon's pastor. If Vernon didn't want to go there, he couldn't push it. But he couldn't leave it alone. Singleton prayed for guidance.

In early 2013, Vernon was hit with sky-scraping blood pressure, wild attacks that caused dramatic swelling in his feet. He was in and out of the hospital for treatment. During the same period, Singleton was again in his office when the phone buzzed. This time, it was an attorney from the Ohio Innocence Project, again asking the pastor to speak with Vernon about the 1975 case. Considering Vernon's rocky health then, the pastor wondered if time wasn't running out.

One Sunday, after church, Singleton trekked to MetroHealth hospital. He found Vernon alone in a hospital bed, spirits high, watching television. He was getting out the following day.

"I have something to talk to you about," Singleton told him. "I've been praying about it and watching you."

Singleton told Vernon that he'd read the *Scene* story. "I want to know if you're ready to talk about it."

Vernon was out of the bed like someone had cracked a starter's pistol. Arms wrapped around Singleton, a weeping face soaked his shoulder. The words tumbled out.

**VERNON CONFESSED TO** Singleton — and later in a sworn affidavit taken by the Ohio Innocence Project in April 2013 — that he not only lied about witnessing the murder, but that he'd been forced to do so by Cleveland Police.

Vernon admitted he'd actually gone home on May 19, 1975, on the regular school bus — not earlier on a city bus as he testified in court. While the bus was pulling into the neighborhood, Vernon and the other school kids heard gunshots ringing from the Fairmount Cut-Rate.

By the time the kids had rushed over, Harry Franks was gasping his last breaths. Soon police cars and ambulances were crowding the street, as well as a growing number of onlookers. Taking it all in behind his thick glasses, Vernon was scared.

"I'd never seen anything like it before," he said later. The boy and a friend, Tommy Hall, walked home. Hall told Vernon he knew who did it: "Ricky, Bitzie and Buddy." Vernon dropped off his bag, then returned to the crime scene. When a uniformed officer asked the crowd if anyone had information on the crime, Vernon offered his name.

“I don’t exactly know why I went up to the police at first,” Vernon said later. “I think I just wanted to be helpful. You have to understand I was 12 years old at the time. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

According to Vernon, when detectives finally spoke with him in the days following the murder, they fed him a steady stream of details gleaned from other witnesses — the number of assailants, the weapons used in the murder, the make and model of the getaway car. After police arrested the Bridgemans and Jackson, Vernon was taken to the police station for a line-up. As he later testified in court, his plan was simple: If he didn’t pick out anyone, the police would let the neighborhood boys go.

At the line-up, the boy failed to make an ID. But a detective took him into a back room. “He got really loud and angry and started yelling at me and call me a liar,” Vernon said in his affidavit. “He was slamming his hands on the table, and pushing things around, calling me this and that. I was frightened and crying.

“The detective said that I was too young to go to jail, but he would arrest my parents for perjury because I was backing out,” he wrote. “My mom was sick at that time, and that really scared me.”

The police wrote out a statement, which Vernon signed. After the first trial, he was given a copy of his testimony to study for the subsequent hearings. The detectives told him never to talk about the case, Vernon would say later.

It is possible detectives actually felt this scared little boy was holding out to protect older guys from his neighborhood. Maybe they felt the threats were justified to make a case. Maybe they didn’t care. But Vernon’s testimony was all that stuck the murder to Jackson and the Bridgemans. What’s most troubling is how much actual evidence pointed in other directions.

The original case files kept by Cleveland detectives — Eugene Terpay and J.T. Farmer — show a number of names floated through the investigation.

The day after the murder, the FBI contacted Cleveland detectives with names from an informant. The list included brothers Arthur and Willie King, who had been tied to earlier stick-ups. The police also traced a green car matching the description of the green getaway vehicle to a 23-year-old named Ishmael Hixon. He was arrested as a suspect, but witnesses failed to ID. Less than six months later, Hixon was charged on 18 counts of aggravated robbery in a separate case.

A woman from the neighborhood also told police she believed her son, Paul Gardenshire, was involved. The 16-year-old, who was related to the Bridgemans by marriage, had already been snagged by police for juvie aggravated burglary and auto theft. Again, witnesses didn’t come through with an ID. But in June 1975, after the arrests, another guy from the neighborhood named

Gardenshire as responsible. He claimed not only did the teen have a .38, the caliber of the gun used in the murder, but was driving around town in a green car. Detectives found the car parked in the neighborhood, and made a note in the report to pull the driver over next time it was on the street. There’s no indication in the files if that happened.

Gardenshire’s mother, however, sat in everyday during the trials of Ricky, Ronnie and Wiley. A 1978 crime spree landed Paul in prison for a rack of charges including aggravated robbery, murder, and grand theft.

The suspects weren’t the only ones involved with histories that in hindsight raise new questions.

Detective Eugene Terpay had been with Cleveland police since 1949. According to his personnel file, a year before he met Edward Vernon, he was mentioned in a federal lawsuit filed by a former suspect who claimed he was convicted for a 1966 burglary after Terpay “made false statements” at trial. The conviction, the suit claims, was later overturned by a federal court.

And in November 1975, civil rights attorney and future Cleveland School Board member Stanley Tolliver filed a complaint against Terpay, alleging the detective and other officers beat a confession out of his client, a suspect in the murder of a Bedford Heights cop. An investigation found no basis for the complaint.

**MAD DOESN’T BEGIN** to touch it. Anger isn’t in the neighborhood. You would think despair would suffice, but no. Toss as many synonyms as you want at it, but the words can’t cage the feeling: One moment, you’re a young man, life stretching out ahead. Then you’re in a cell. For no reason. When Jackson and the Bridgemans were sent off to Lucasville, each waged his own bouts with the feeling.

They had plenty to be mad about, even beyond the police and prosecutors who sent them away. There were their court-appointed attorneys, who when they weren’t half-assing the defense, showed

*A recently released Jackson talks with friends.*



Photo by Frank J. Lanza



Jackson with his attorneys, Mark Godsy (left) and Brian Howe (right).

in court stinking of booze. There were the prison guards who got a laugh out of forcing a different death row inmate every week to clean out the execution chamber. There was Edward Vernon. And there was the neighborhood, the people they'd grown up with, who knew Vernon was lying but didn't step up.

Wiley Bridgeman poured himself into his legal case. He won a retrial in 1977, but returned again with the same sentence. At one point, he was 20 days away from execution before the Supreme Court struck down the death penalty in 1978, commuting all death row sentences to life in prison. From there, his mental state began to break. Eventually he'd be diagnosed with schizophrenia.

In a way, Wiley was what saved his brother. Ronnie beamed his focus onto his older sibling, worrying about his state and how he was doing, keeping it together for him.

Ricky wrestled on his own.

"I dealt with it badly," he told me. "I was acting out, showing aggression, having this I-don't-care attitude." The attitude was the armor his anger gave him. But it came at a price. Ricky was racked with constant anxiety, his blood pressure geysered high, a pain always chewed at his stomach. It went on for years.

What turned him around was the company he was keeping. He saw jailhouse lifers who had let the bitterness burn away everything else. They were reduced to hard, angry cores, sloshing poison everywhere — criticizing everything, refusing to find good anywhere.

"I was easily becoming like that," Ricky said. "You get to that point where you either make a change, or you let that anger drag you under, and it will, it's just a matter of time. I realized I might have to spend my life in here, and I can't do it like this, being angry.

"It was a gradual thing," he told me. "It just didn't hurt as bad. But the truth is, the anger doesn't disappear." He just learned you couldn't let it sit in the driver's seat.

He read all the time. Science fiction was his favorite, weighty philosophic writers like Robert Heinlein. It all went back to those

episodes of *Star Trek* he watched with his stepdad. He liked the idea of the future, what it would look like, how the human race would evolve to a better state. "As bleak as my reality was, I could always fantasize about the future or pick up a book and be on another planet or be in another time."

Ricky also began enrolling in classes. He got training in welding. But his true skill turned out to be gardening. At Grafton there were three greenhouses. It was the whole process — seed to flower, the care and attention and detail — that he liked. He grew poinsettias for the institution's annual prison sale.

And he maintained his innocence. Five times he was up for parole. Each time he'd be under consideration if he admitted what he'd done and expressed remorse. And each time he'd say he didn't do it.

And he worked his case. Over the years, Ricky penned letters to all kinds of organizations that dealt with wrongful incarceration cases. Nearly a decade back, a fellow inmate told him about the Ohio Innocence Project. Ricky scribbled a letter outlining his case.

**THE OHIO INNOCENCE** Project operates out the University of Cincinnati's law school. The organization has had a file open on Jackson's case for a number of years. Until very recently, it gathered dust.

Although the law students pouring long hours into studying court transcripts felt the inmate was really innocent, the case lacked a sturdy legal basis to secure Jackson's release. New trials are granted and convictions overturned because of new evidence. Even the *Scene* investigation essentially poked holes in the conviction using information that was available to Jackson's original attorneys, incompetent as they were.

Vernon, however, was a game-changer.

"If Ed hadn't come forward within that period, I don't know whether the case would have stayed open," admits Brian Howe, an Ohio Innocence Project staff attorney who joined the organization in January. "He was the new evidence that really was the catalyst for moving forward."

Still, even with Vernon's change-up, Howe's case wasn't a lock. "There is a precedent where the factors that happen around recantations make courts suspicious," Howe told me. "The witness was either lying then or they are lying now, so the court immediately mistrusts them."

What Howe and Jackson's other attorneys had in their corner was the stack of previous evidence. "There was no reason for Ed to lie now, and there is so much context here, and you have all the other facts and witnesses, it all points toward his 1975 testimony as false."

Last March, the Ohio Innocence Project filed a motion for new

trial with the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas on behalf of Ricky Jackson. The filing argued Vernon's recantation represented evidence that would have changed the outcome of the original trial. The attorneys also filed a motion for post-conviction relief on the basis that Jackson's constitutional rights had been violated in 1975 because the defense didn't know about the pressure Vernon had been put under to cooperate.

On the day the paperwork went through the court, I called Kwame to relay the news.

"That's beautiful," he said in his slow-rolling voice. "That's beautiful." I excitedly babbled into the phone for another half minute until I realized I was talking to dead air. Kwame's wife then came on the line, explaining her husband had to hand the phone over. He was too emotional to talk.

In one of the letters we exchanged in the following months, Ricky's response to the good news in prison was emotional too, but in a gut-punching sort of way.

"Honestly, though, I doubt this will ever be over entirely. How do you shake off something that has been a part of your life for so long?" Ricky wrote. "As much as I might long for some semblance of a 'Normal life,' there are certain realities that I have experienced throughout this whole ordeal that have so profoundly changed the way I look at everything and everybody, I simply have to accept the fact that I will never be happy or completely whole again. They broke something inside of me."

The Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office likely wasn't expecting a nearly 40-year-old case to flare back up. Throughout the summer, the state filed numerous motions for more time to study the details of the original proceedings against Jackson.

The office, however, has made past wrongful convictions a priority since Prosecutor Timothy McGinty took office in 2013. Earlier this year, the office announced it would create a Conviction Integrity Unit to re-examine old cases and claims of innocence. The project was inspired in part by McGinty's experience as a prosecutor on the Michael Green case. In 1988, he secured a guilty verdict against the defendant for sexual assault. Green was later exonerated by DNA.

The nine-person unit has been steadily picking up applications for exoneration throughout the year. But no one has yet been cleared by the team.

Actual exonerations are rare. In 2013, 87 people nationwide were cleared of crimes they didn't commit. In recent memory, Cuyahoga County has seen its share. In 2006, a judge tossed the 1989 murder conviction of Joe D'Ambrosio after the defense proved prosecutors withheld exculpatory evidence at the original trial. In 2010, the county saw the exoneration of Darrel Houston for the 1992 murder of a deli clerk based on the changing story of an

eyewitness. David Ayers was cleared of his role in the 1999 murder of an elderly man after spending 11 years in jail.

But as the track record shows, the state has a financial incentive to fight innocence claims. Ohio compensates wrongfully imprisoned individuals for up to \$40,000 a year, as well as court costs and lost wages. The state is also open to legal action by exonerees. In 2013, Ayers won a \$13.2 million federal court civil settlement. Simply getting out is but step one. The state then needs to file additional paperwork declaring the exoneree actually innocent, shouldering the blame. Only then does the state open the checkbook.

In September, the prosecutor's office filed an opposition to Ricky's motion for post-conviction relief and a new trial. The move teed up a hearing where both sides would essentially argue whether Vernon's recantation was legitimate.

Ironically, Ricky's case landed in the courtroom of Judge Richard McMonagle. His father, George McMonagle, had proceeded over the original 1975 trial.

**THE BIG WINDOWS** on the 16th floor hallway of the Justice Center in downtown Cleveland peer out on the eastern stretch of the city kissing the lakeshore — City Hall, the convention center, the erector-set skeletons of new construction. But on the morning of November 17, the whole view was swallowed by a surprise lake effect blizzard. Snow fled past the windows like sand rushing through an hourglass. As Judge Richard McMonagle's courtroom filled for the Jackson hearing, Edward Vernon stood alone at the windows, eyes on where the city should be, thoughts likely elsewhere.

In his 50s, Vernon is a short, shrunken man. He appeared in court layered in a heavy overcoat and a neat argyle sweater. Big deep sighs escaped his chest like steam out of a radiator. He has a habit of cocking his head to the side when he's asked a question, eyelids down to slits behind his glasses, suspiciously rolling whatever you've said around in his mind, looking for the trap.

*Jackson addresses the media after his release.*



Photo by Frank J. Lanza



Wiley Bridgeman on the day of his release.

Brian Howe was running point for Ricky's defense. Vernon likely didn't recognize the man sitting down from Howe's left: middle-aged yet muscularly taut under his traffic-cone orange prison jumper. Ricky quietly watched the other man cross the room, his hands and feet manacled in chains.

Howe slowly steered Vernon back through the day of the crime and his encounters with police. The witness admitted in court he had not seen the crime, and initially had not picked Ricky and Wiley out of a line-up. But after failing to make an ID, Vernon said, he'd been threatened.

"[The detective] said, 'We'll fix it,'" Vernon said, words trickling out between tears. "After that, they took a statement from me that I was scared, that's why I didn't pick them out of the line-up. But I wasn't scared. I didn't pick them out because I knew they didn't do it."

"Did you ever actually see Ricky Jackson involved in the shooting?" Howe asked later.

"No, I didn't," Vernon replied, head shaking.

"Did you ever see Ronnie Bridgeman involved in the conflict?"

"No."

"Did you ever see Wiley Bridgeman involved in the conflict?"

"No."

"Did you ever see the three of them fleeing the scene?"

"No."

"Did you ever see a green getaway car?"

"No."

"Did you understand at the time that these were capital cases, these were death penalty cases?"

"No. No, I didn't."

"How did you feel about testifying about something that you knew wasn't true?"

"I felt really bad about it. Guilty, about what I was lying about, I carried all of that."

Ricky's hands were clasped to his face with his eyes shut tight, as if he were in prayer, as Vernon spoke the truth out loud.

Finally, he thought. Finally. Finally. Finally finally finally. Finally.

**VERNON'S TESTIMONY STRETCHED** into a second day, largely thanks to the cross-examination by the state.

"You sound just like these prosecutors and these detectives did back then," a frustrated Vernon barked at the prosecutor at one point on the second day of testimony. "You're trying to trip me up with questions and get me to say things that are not true."

"I'm not stupid, okay?" he rasped. "I understand you're supposed to ask me questions, but I'm tired of you trying to make me look like I'm stupid or senile or crazy."

After his stint on the stand was finally over, Vernon was pacing a hallway outside.

"I just want them to be free," he told me.

No one expected a result that day. Typically, motion hearings conclude and only weeks later, after a judge has weighed the facts and law, is a decision issued. That was likely reason why the courtroom was empty when the clock swung around to 2:15 on Tuesday afternoon: Everyone figured the show was over.

Howe and his team were in the courtroom, waiting. The prosecution's side of the courtroom was empty. Suddenly, about six lawyers from the state marched in, with Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Tim McGinty bringing up the rear.

"What's your pleasure, consul," McMonagle started.

The prosecutor stood at the table. "Your honor, Tim McGinty on behalf of the state of Ohio," he began. "We are waiving final argument on the issue. The state, in light of the evidence produced by the defense at this hearing, and the total recantation of the key witness, hereby drops our opposition for a motion for a new trial.

"The state concedes the obvious, it is no longer in a position to retry the case. And as all key witnesses that might produce any collateral evidence are no longer living, we do so fully recognizing that the result will be the eventual release of Mr. Jackson and the other co-defendant. If the court does grant their motion, which we no longer oppose, we will move for a dismissal today."

There was a pause in the room when all the facts seemed to slide into place: Ricky was getting out.

"Alright," McMonagle announced. "Mr. Jackson, we're going to get you back here on Friday, just so that all the paperwork is done."

The judge concluded: "You made the right choice, Mr. McGinty."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you. Thank you," Ricky cried from the table, before burying a sobbing head into his hands. When he came up from air, he eagerly shook hands with his speechless legal team. Someone pulled out an iPhone, asking Ricky if there was anyone he wanted to call. From memory, he recited Kwame's number.

"Hello... Who is this?... This is Ricky... Hey it's over man... It's over bro, I'm coming home... Friday, man. Friday. Friday... Be here

to get me. Please... Let everybody know... I love you."

**KWAME WAS WORKING** the pedal with a heavy foot on Friday morning. In the chilled early light, he and his wife LaShawn were on their way for the 9 a.m. hearing. Kwame hadn't slept in three days. Now he was going on fumes, but the excitement was doubled, and that was more than enough to carry him through: Wiley had been brought to Cleveland from the Allen Correctional Institute in Lima on Judge McMonagle's order. He might get out as well. This could all be over in a couple of hours, his brother and best friend finally free.

"Let's go make history," Kwame announced after parking his car across from the Justice Center.

Inside the courtroom, cameras crowded and trained on Kwame and LeShawn; reporters cycled by asking Kwame for details about the case. "This is the longest 9 o'clock I've ever had to wait for," LeShawn whispered. "It's like waiting for a roller coaster to start," her husband answered.

When guards brought Ricky Jackson out at the hour, the prison jumper was gone. He was wearing dress slacks and a zip-up sweater with an argyle pattern. A slow smile spread across his face, revealing perfect white teeth. His glasses winked coins of light as he moved.

"Life is full of small victories," Judge McMonagle said before closing Ricky's legal case. "This is a big one."

An hour later, Wiley would walk free as well.

According to the National Registry of Exonerations, Jackson's 39 years is the longest wrongful incarceration term to end in release in American history.

Ricky paced the small holding cell as paperwork was shuffled and stamped and filed. A little more waiting in a life of waiting. He didn't know it then, but 16 floors below, dozens of cameras were clogging the hallway where he'd soon take his first free steps, ready to beam his image out to the world. ABC, NBC, CBS, The Today Show. CNN.

To pass the time, his eyes grazed the walls, chiseled with the usual jailhouse graffiti. Names. Dates. Swastikas. Go fuck yourself. Back again, how stupid. Then Ricky's eye hooked on something familiar.

144 RIP.

144, the first three digits of his prison number, the ID he'd been given four decades back. His identity, quite literally, as he'd come to know it.

He paused, getting familiar with the idea. The number. Not me. 144061, rest in peace. Not me.

**THE THREE BOYS** from Arthur Avenue met again in the bar of

the Renaissance Hotel, a cold walk away from the Justice Center, all three together for the first time in 39 years. After stepping out into a barrage of cameras, Ricky and his legal team scooted into the hotel for privacy. Kwame, LaShawn and Wiley walked over as soon as the brothers reunited outside the jail's exit. Kwame was still getting used to the snow-white Santa beard ringing his older brother's face when they walked up the lobby steps and caught sight of Ricky.

The crowd clapped as the three men embraced, arms around each other's shoulders and heads bent like an offense huddling at the 50-yard line. Kwame's wife LaShawn then stepped forward. "Hey there brother," she said before hugging Ricky for the first time.

Lunch was Red Lobster. Whole appetizer menus were polished off. Ricky, Kwame and Wiley all bulldozed through the Admiral's Feast. Toasts were hoisted. Someone ordered a glass of champagne for Ricky. "Tastes like manna from heaven," he announced. "I don't think Wiley's stopped smiling," LaShawn kidded her brother-in-law from across the table.

Later, at the hotel again, the Ohio Innocence Project volunteers began saying their goodbyes. There was rumbling about the next steps for men who've been in jail for so long — getting ID, finding a place to stay, setting up GoFundMe accounts to help them get on their feet. "I'm still getting caught up," Kwame said. "So you can imagine, Buddy and Ricky, they're just coming out the door."

The talk eventually turned to possible legal action down the road. "We were just all talking about it," Wiley confided in me. "They can't really never pay us back for what they took away from you."

That night, although they were all exhausted, they drove around the city until 2 a.m. They didn't get out, just rolled past old neighborhoods, including Arthur Avenue, abandoned now, drowned in shadow. For Ricky, it was pretty much all sci-fi, like getting off one of those ships in *Star Trek*, confronting a whole strange new world. **S**

*Kwame's wife LaShawn pinches Jackson's cheeks.*



Photo by Frank J. Lanza