

Righting Wrongful Convictions: One lawyer's life's work

This week, Claire McGourlay, professor of legal education at the University of Manchester and executive producer of the [Manchester Innocence podcast](#), reflects on the interview with the man who inspired the formation of the Manchester Innocence project, and dozens more around the world.

When defence lawyer Justin Brooks opened his daily newspaper in 2018, he read a story that shocked him so deeply that it would change the course of his life and inspire a global movement.

The article described how a young woman called Marilyn Mulero was sitting in a Chicago prison, waiting to be executed for a double murder.

But it was a crime that she insisted she did not commit.

After hours of interrogation with no legal counsel, police had forced Marilyn to make a false 'confession'.

Not only that, Marilyn was coerced into signing a plea bargain, giving up her chance of a trial by jury.

Justin said: "I thought: 'how could that be possible?' so I went out and met with her on death row and she told me she was innocent.

"She never received a trial and her lawyer advised her to plead guilty in a double homicide.

"It was so shocking to me that I recruited some law students and we started investigating her case.

"On the first day of our investigation, we found out that the only eyewitness was lying. It was factually impossible for her to see what she said she saw. The case was a total fabrication."

It took two years, but Justin and his team of four students ultimately got the death sentence reversed, though it would be another 25 years before Marilyn was finally freed.

"Maybe I'm not the smartest lawyer in the world", he says, "but I'm one of the most determined."

"Once we commit to a case, we never let it go."

The case prompted him to set up the California Innocence Project, which works to exonerate the wrongly convicted, and now has more than 100 voluntary attorneys and dozens of students as members.

And it has inspired the formation of 68 more innocence projects around the world, including here in Manchester.

The Manchester Innocence Project, based in the Justice Hub at The University of Manchester, was established in 2020 as a staff-student collaboration aimed at helping the wrongfully convicted and promoting positive change in the justice system.

Students engage with clients, witnesses, lawyers, and experts, with the goal of overturning miscarriages of justice, which allows them to gain hands-on experience. And Justin says law students are fundamental to the Innocence Project's successes, contributing much of the detailed research and analysis that can make or break a case.

He said: "The only way to train a great lawyer is for them to work on real cases.

With every single case I've won, I'm standing on the shoulders of my students, who have put in all the work to gather the evidence needed to win."

You can listen to the podcast [here](#).

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