

Life after a Death Sentence: Destined to be together

In this blog, Claire McGourlay, professor of legal education at the University of Manchester and executive producer of the [Manchester Innocence podcast](#), shares the remarkable story of two people who lived 4,000 miles apart but were destined to find each other.

Sonia Jacobs and Peter Pringle came from opposite sides of the Atlantic, but both spent years on death row for crimes they did not commit, and their extraordinary stories inspired them to dedicate their lives to helping people who've been through the same experience.

Today they are the husband-and-wife team behind 'The Sunny Center Foundation'- a not-for-profit organisation on the west coast of Ireland for people recently freed from prison after being wrongly convicted.

Sonia, better known as Sunny, was sentenced to death for the murder of two police officers during a routine traffic stop in Florida in 1976.

Meanwhile, in 1980, Peter Pringle was one of the last people to be given the death penalty in Ireland after two police officers were also killed during a bungled bank robbery.

And both served more than a decade behind bars, all the while arguing their innocence, before their convictions were eventually overturned by their legal defence.

Sunny said: "Prison was something that nothing in my life could prepare me for; beyond anything that I ever expected to experience.

"You resort to a basic level of survival. You're in a state of fear all the time."

And she adds: "If it wasn't for pro bono attorneys, I don't know anyone who was wrongly convicted who would be free today."

But Peter says they both have a survivor's mentality and had both turned to yoga to help find some peace through their ordeal.

And one of the first things they both did on their release was mark their freedom by taking a swim in the ocean.

Peter had read about Sunny's exoneration in the newspaper while he was still in prison, and a mutual friend put them in touch once he was released.

Today they are married, living and working together in rural Ireland.

But both found their dreams of freedom were very different to the reality and they have now found a new purpose in life with The Sunny Center.

Sunny said: "It's totally overwhelming to try and integrate into society again.

"But people come to us because they know we've been there, done that and come through the other side.

"We seem to have found a way to have a nice life - to have love, healing and happiness - and they want what we have."

Peter says: "From this little house in the west of Ireland, our work has gone international. We've hosted exonerees from Ireland, America, Britain, Taiwan and Pakistan.

"It's a safe place where people can come and connect with other people who understand them."

And the serendipity of Sunny and Peter's story is not lost on them.

Peter says: "Some people say how extraordinary it was that we met, but I think it would be extraordinary if we didn't meet, because we have so much in common.

"I've come to believe it was destiny."

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

ENDS