

I'm not a monster: One woman's fight for freedom

In the latest episode of the [Manchester Innocence Podcast](#), Claire McGourlay, professor of legal education at the University of Manchester and executive producer of the podcast, hears the harrowing story of a woman who was wrongly convicted of killing her own child and sentenced to prison while six months pregnant.

Kristine Bunch is a fighter.

In 1995, a fire ripped through her Indiana home and, despite Kristine's desperate efforts to save him, her three-year-old son Tony was killed. But that was far from the end of this tragic story.

Within hours, investigators visited the hospital where she was being treated for injuries sustained in the fire and told her they were already certain it was arson.

Kristine said: "They asked me to come to the police station. I was barefoot and in borrowed clothes. They started asking me about insurance. That was the moment I realised they were coming after me."

In court, prosecutors worked to paint a false picture of Kristine as a party girl with no morals because she was an unmarried mother.

She said: "I was working part-time and studying, trying to get extra skills so I could get a better job with benefits and have stability. Over and over again I was saying I was innocent, but no one was listening to me.

"To hear government experts saying this was arson, I knew I was going to be found guilty. I was not only going through the loss of my three-year-old, but I was also six and a half months pregnant. The judge told me I had got myself pregnant in order to get sympathy from the court."

Sentenced to 60 years for murder and 50 years for arson, she was told her new child would be taken from her and she would never see them again.

But as soon as she arrived in prison, Kristine began researching her case and found a route to place her baby with family.

She gave birth in prison while chained to a bed by her ankle, and her 17-year-old younger brother quit school to look after the baby boy, who Kristine called Trent.

Determined to be reunited with her son, Kristine signed up for every prison educational programme she could, earning a degree and numerous other qualifications.

She spent countless hours in the prison law library, learning about fire science and uncovering inconsistencies in the evidence presented in her case, including an analysis of the fire that had been altered to convict her.

Kristine said: “Knowing Trent was out there waiting for me kept me focused. There was also part of me that was determined to show that I’m not a monster.”

In 2007, the Centre for Unlawful Convictions at Northwestern University – part of the Innocence Project – took over her case.

It was a slow process, but in 2012 a court reversed her conviction after new evidence concluded an electrical fault was to blame for the fire.

Kristine was released 17 years after her wrongful arrest, though she had the threat of a retrial hanging over her for six months until prosecutors finally dropped the case.

She said: “After the fire, I had no pictures of Tony or any material possessions apart from a plot in the cemetery where he was buried. I had no money and no idea how I was going to put a roof over my 16-year-old son’s head. It was overwhelming and frightening.”

But the experience only reinforced Kristine’s determination to right the wrongs she had seen first-hand.

Today, fighting injustice is Kristine’s life; she co-founded a non-profit group called [justis4justus](#), which supports people who have been exonerated, and works for an organisation called Interrogating Justice, which campaigns to reform the legal system.

She said: “The prison system is a billion-dollar industry and it’s all about making money, not rehabilitating and taking care of people.

“If I stop speaking up, those innocent people sitting in prison my never know that there are people who will fight for them. For all those people who don’t have a voice, I’m going to keep using mine.”

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

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