

Life is beautiful: Surviving in a broken system

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 terrifying ordeal of a man convicted of a crime so reviled that it wasn't just the justice system that was against him, but his fellow prisoners too.

When Luis Vargas was wrongly convicted in 1999, it wasn't just his liberty that was at stake, it was his life.

In a case of mistaken identity, exacerbated by police failures, Luis was handed a minimum 55-year sentence for rape. The nature of this crime made Luis a marked man inside the gang-infested Los Angeles jail that was now his home.

Luis said: "My world fell apart. In prison, if your cellmate knows that you are a rapist, he has to kill you. If he doesn't, he will be killed himself.

"When I first walked into my six-man cell, my stress level was off the charts. I needed to create a new identity, so I told them I was a burglar.

"I was always on edge. There were rumours that there was a rapist in the institution and people were saying they were going to stab them. Another time, a man was beaten so badly by a gang he was killed. When would it be my turn?"

To back up his new identity, Luis started working as a prison clerk, which gave him the opportunity to secretly edit his inmate file, removing all references to rape.

He says his Christian faith helped keep him strong as he worked to fight his case, ultimately contacting the California Innocence Project, which was co-founded by attorney Justin Brooks. The team quickly spotted multiple red flags in Luis' case, which they decided to fight on his behalf.

Justin said: "Luis' was the kind of case that had all the earmarks of a problematic identification, which is the leading cause of wrongful convictions in the US.

"The most shocking thing about Luis' case was that, even after he was in jail, these attacks continued to happen and the police didn't share that information with his defence attorney."

In the course of their investigation, the Innocence Project team were able to match DNA from one of Luis' alleged crimes with another similar crime that occurred while he was incarcerated, proving the real rapist was still at large.

But even they were surprised by the speed at which the LA district attorney reversed Luis' conviction.

Justin said: "This process normally takes years. They fight us on most of our cases until the bitter end. But in Luis' case, it was crystal clear to anyone that he was innocent and a massive mistake had been made."

In 2016, after 16 years inside, Luis was finally exonerated.

He said: "I remember when the jailer took the handcuffs off and opened the door so I could leave as a free man. I looked up at the sky and I wasn't surrounded by electric fences. I saw freedom.

"I've been exonerated for six years now. I've been able to celebrate Christmases and Thanksgivings. I've been able to hug my wife. I'm still going through some issues, but even though I'm still struggling, life is beautiful."

While Justin takes great heart from successes like Luis', he admits that he struggles with the knowledge that his team can't help everyone.

He said: "In the country that incarcerates the most people in the world, California is the state that incarcerates the most people, so we get thousands of letters every year seeking help.

"We're their last chance. When we turn someone down, they will likely die in prison. That's heart breaking for me."

And while Luis says he has been able to forgive those who sent him to jail, he admits: "I'm still angry at the system."

Justin consoles him: "I'm still angry too, brother."

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

ENDS