

Kirk Noble Bloodsworth, USA

Speaker, Round Table: Innocence & Abolition



He is the first American sentenced to death row who was exonerated by DNA, although his death sentence had already been commuted to two consecutive life sentences by the time his exoneration based upon DNA evidence was in the works.

An honorably discharged former Marine and Maryland resident, Bloodsworth was convicted in 1985 of sexual assault, rape, and first-degree premeditated murder for the 1984 rape and murder of a nine-year-old girl in Rosedale, Maryland.^[1] Even though five eyewitnesses had placed him with the victim, he continued to maintain his innocence throughout his trial and subsequent incarceration. In 1992, while in jail, Bloodsworth read an account of how DNA fingerprinting had led to the conviction of Colin Pitchfork in the killings of Dawn Ashworth and Lynda Mann; hoping to prove his innocence, he pushed to have the evidence against him tested by the then-novel method.^[2] Initially, the available evidence in the case — traces of semen in the victim's underwear — was thought to have been destroyed; however, when eventually located (in a paper bag in the judge's chambers), testing proved that the semen did not match Bloodsworth's DNA profile. In 1993, Bloodsworth was released; by that time, he had spent almost nine years in prison, two of them on death row.

Though released from prison, Bloodsworth was not formally exonerated. In 2003, nearly a decade after Bloodsworth's release, prisoner DNA evidence added to state and federal databases identified the real killer, Kimberly Shay Ruffner. A month after the 1984 murder, Ruffner had been sentenced to 45 years for an unrelated burglary, attempted rape and assault with intent to murder, and had in fact been incarcerated in a cell one floor below Bloodsworth's own cell. In light of the new evidence, Ruffner was charged with the crime for which Bloodsworth had been wrongfully convicted, and in 2004 Ruffner pled guilty to the 1984 murder.

While in prison, Bloodsworth converted to the Catholic Church from Protestantism. Today, Bloodsworth is a Program Officer for The Justice Project, and he has been an ardent supporter of the Innocence Protection Act (IPA) since its introduction in Congress in February 2000. The IPA established the Kirk Bloodsworth Post-

Conviction DNA Testing Program, a program that will help states defray the costs of post-conviction DNA testing.