



# RONNIE RHODES: ON THE OUTSIDE

In the Spring 2011 issue of the *Washburn Lawyer*, we introduced readers to **Rebecca Woodman, '87**, visiting associate professor of law, her Wrongful Convictions class, and their investigation of the Ronald "Ronnie" Rhodes case. Rhodes was convicted in 1981 of murder in Wichita but has maintained his innocence. In April 2008, Rhodes filed a motion for DNA testing in his case, hopeful that technology widely used now but not available at his trial might prove his innocence. In fall 2009, Woodman and her students joined forces with Ron Sylvester, formerly of the *Wichita Eagle*, to examine the Rhodes case after finding inconsistencies in docket reports. Unfortunately, evidence that could potentially be tested for DNA in the case to help answer questions brought forth by Woodman, Sylvester, the *Wichita Eagle*, and the Washburn Law students, has been either destroyed or misplaced.

Released on parole in August 2012, Rhodes spoke to Woodman's students about his experience, the role he believes the Wrongful Convictions class, Woodman, and Sylvester played in securing his parole, and his future. Also in attendance was Janet Weiblen, a pastor in the Kansas City area who befriended Rhodes during her work with the prison ministry, Reaching Out From Within, which teaches social skills to inmates.

*Last in a series  
by Vicki Estes*

Tasting freedom for the first time in 31 years, Ronnie Rhodes described his first main meal outside prison walls. “It was a lovely dinner with Janet (Weiblen) and my mentor. We had roast pork, mashed potatoes and squash, and a spinach salad with mandarin oranges and avocados. And a drink—sangria—non-alcoholic of course,” Rhodes recalled with a smile. The meal was in stark contrast to his original wish for a basic bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. He said he thought better of it after someone told him he was crazy to want to eat a sandwich on his first day out of prison after 31 years.

Rhodes was paroled in August 2012 after eight unsuccessful attempts before the Kansas Parole Board beginning in 1996. He says the parole board gave a different reason each time for not releasing him or they required that he complete new goals. One time, he says the parole board told him he would need to quit smoking before they would consider his release. “I got one reason and that was to develop a no-smoking plan,” he chuckled. “And follow it—cigarettes that is,” he added to clarify.

“I’m telling you every time I saw the next board it was a different board. So I could never get a leg up.”

Rhodes believes the only way he would have been released sooner was if he were to confess the crime, something he often felt pressured to do. “Every time, because, you see, in Kansas parole is grace. It’s not a right. It’s a privilege, and it’s these three powerful people that grant you this privilege. They expect for those of us who are asking for this hand of grace to show remorse for what we had done. I couldn’t admit to something I didn’t do.”

So for 31 years Rhodes did the drill, met with the parole board, listened to what they had to say and then, after being denied, awaited his next hearing. “And if they’d have kept me there for 30 more years I would have just been there ‘cause I didn’t kill this guy. I’m sorry he’s dead. But I didn’t kill him.”

In an attempt to eliminate the racial disparity existing in the indeterminate method of sentencing felons, the Kansas Legislature instituted the 1993 Kansas Sentencing Guidelines. Most inmates in the Kansas prison system today have defined sentence lengths based on those guidelines. However, more than 700 inmates, like Rhodes, incarcerated before the guidelines took effect, must go before the parole board once they are eligible. In 2011 a prisoner review board replaced the parole board.

“I believe that with the prison review board my story became more important. It scared ‘em,” Rhodes said.

After being passed up for parole again in 2011, Rhodes recalled Weiblen’s suggestion that he maintain a low profile and cease talking about the case. “Like Janet has always told me, ‘No matter what, Ronnie Rhodes, these people are not going to say they were wrong.’”

“There was a lot of publicity about this case and a lot of pressure not only on D.O.C. officials but on the Wichita police department to release records they were refusing to release. And even on the parole board before it became the prisoner review board to release records that they had refused to release because there was public pressure to do so,” Woodman explained to the students. “I think it was very prudent for Ronnie to keep quiet for a while. It had the desired effect in the long run, but it had reached a critical mass.”



*Professor Woodman explains the Rhodes case to students.*

Rhodes believes the publicity generated by the investigation prompted the prisoner review board to examine his case. “It caused them to read the facts of the case, that there’s a problem, and it’s not Ronnie Rhodes saying there’s a problem. It’s people working that have a career, as a lawyer, or newspaper reporter. It’s these people saying there’s a problem,” Rhodes said. “Make no mistake. That is the reason I am out of prison and I will never forget that, ever.”

Rhodes was abruptly transferred in December 2011 from Lansing, where he had spent 19 years, to Hutchinson a month after the Washburn Law Clinic filed a petition for clemency to Gov. Sam Brownback and sought signatures for a petition. Department of Corrections officials did not offer a reason for the transfer, which at the time was devastating for Rhodes, who had secured a job working in the kitchen in his unit at Lansing. In hindsight, however, Rhodes believes the move was for the best and that it accomplished his goal to blend in with the prison population. “To some extent they accomplished that for me because they transferred me from Lansing to Hutch. So they kind of sent me underground.”

rang while in the midst of his dialogue with the students, prompting giggles from the crowd. After a quick, “I’ll call you back,” he returned his focus on the students.

“My problem is wanting to master everything right now. I’m trying to make up for lost time and am in a hurry to catch up.”

Originally from Wichita, Rhodes says his family is now here, motioning to Woodman and Wieblen. Rhodes chose not to parole to his hometown, saying he wouldn’t have survived there, afraid that someone with an axe to grind might try to get him thrown back in jail.



*Ronnie Rhodes talks to the Wrongful Convictions class about his experiences with the legal system.*

Freedom has not brought Rhodes the sense of independence one would expect. In fact, Rhodes says he has encountered the opposite.

“In prison, I was in control of what I did, dependent on no one but myself.” Now, Rhodes tackles the uncertainties life in the modern world presents, exacerbated by 30 years of technology upgrades.

Most difficult for Rhodes is facing situations where he has to remind himself that he doesn’t know the answer. “I’m having a difficult time. I’ve been out for eight days and I’m having a difficult time. The cell phone is killing me really, and the computer,” Rhodes admitted. His cell phone

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Ronnie Rhodes

“I’m under old law and under parole so if someone calls my parole officer and says something like, ‘Well, he’s drinking,’ I’m going to jail. Until they sort it out, I’m going to jail. OK, yeah, bring his black ass back this way; we got something for him.”

Reaching Out from Within, formerly known as Stop the Violence, had a profound impact on Rhodes since its introduction to Lansing inmates in May 2004. “It became my breath. That program became what I needed to pattern my life by. They became my family and my support team. And I love ’em.”

At that moment, Rhodes fought back tears. “I love ’em, and um, so I wanted to be where...” With his face buried in his hands, he wept and then quickly apologized. “I told myself I wasn’t gonna do this. I wanted to be with my family so that is why I didn’t go back to Wichita.”

Rhodes earned a paralegal degree while in prison and is hopeful he can use it someday to help others. When asked by a student what he would change if he could change one thing in the legal system, Rhodes seemed pensive.

“I think that bad convictions come from the initial investigation. I think that the police officers, detectives in particular, when they are investigating a particular crime, they should be a little more thorough...” his voice trailed.

“When they’ve got a witness who has blood all over them?” Woodman interjected.

At press time, Rhodes was living in a faith-based Oxford House planning his next steps, but navigating them one at a time. He explained his desire to regain freedom and to be on his own, yet is he aware that he needs time to adjust to his new life outside prison.

“‘Oh, I am ready’ — you tell yourself that but you’re not ready. But when I am able, other people will help me validate that I am ready.”

As Rhodes’ discussion with the class came to a close, Woodman reflected on the investigation and a conversation she recalled having with her Wrongful Convictions class about the final transcripts of Rhodes’ case.

“The trial’s transcripts pretty clearly show that at the end of the case, when all of the evidence had been presented and the jury began to deliberate, the defense attorney and the judge believed that Ronnie was going to be found not guilty based upon the evidence that was presented at trial,” Woodman recalled.

“Ron [Sylvester] actually talked to the court reporter, who was one of the few people from this case who were still around the Sedgwick County Courthouse, and she remembered Ronnie’s trial and she was shocked that Ronnie had been found guilty.”

So how was Rhodes found guilty in light of what Woodman, the students, and Sylvester uncovered?

“How? I’m not going to pull the race card,” Rhodes said. But Weiblen will.

“Well I’m gonna pull the race card because I’ve read what you (Rebecca) came up with and there was only one viable suspect as far as I can tell. And we’re talking about probably someone well connected who happened to be white. I really think the race card was a major factor in that. I really do and I’ve always thought it was,” Weiblen explained.

If ever found, the missing evidence in the case could eventually exonerate Rhodes. “When we looked at evidence custody receipts, there was no record of that evidence having been destroyed. So, it might still be out there,” Woodman suggested.

Rhodes quickly replied, “But I’m not getting ready to hold my breath on that. I’ve got to get back to living.”



*Ronnie Rhodes and Professor Woodman*