

What do you think the causes of wrongful convictions are and what are some proposed changes that you think would help remedy this pervasive issue?

A Just System

The first lesson I learned about former Judge Elsa Alcalá was her Starbucks order (a grande Caffè Americano with an extra shot of espresso for court days), and the second was to filter her mail with industrial-grade gloves.

While each and every case is intricate, the story I encountered of Alfred Dewayne Brown has stood out among these, highlighting a larger structure of issues facing the criminal justice system and capital punishment: race, class, inadequate public defense counsel, intellectual disability and more.

Alfred Dewayne Brown was the perfect scapegoat for the shooting of a police officer that left the community reeling: a minority male in public housing with inconsistent witnesses. Thankfully, Brian Stolarz, the pro bono lawyer, had a perfect storm of coincidences that were necessary to liberate Brown from the notorious Huntsville, Texas death penalty holding center.

First, Stolarz was able to find the records of the falsified testimony of Brown's roommate that was the lynchpin of the original trial. Stolarz was so desperate that he scoured the documentation and eventually accidentally stumbled on it *in the garage of a retired police officer* even though records could have been disposed of after trial. Through this endeavor, Stolarz finds that the prosecutor in charge during the trial had coerced the roommate into the false testimony by threatening to unnecessarily call the Child Protective Services on the roommate's child. (Thankfully, the prosecutor was later stripped of his license and has moved states in his retirement.) Additionally, Stolarz was burdened with having to convince a prisoner to confess the identity of the offender in order to prove his client's innocence. Even after the offender was found, Brown had to undergo another trial in order to repeal the effects of the previous one. Only after over a dozen years since Alfred Dewayne Brown's sentence was he able to be reunited with his family.

Despite these successes, Stolarz and his team still faced incredible setbacks financially and within their respective careers to ensure the time and care needed to secure justice for even one person. Stolarz himself was sidelined at his firm due to his focus on the pro bono work. While Brown may be able to appeal for financial

compensation, he and his family were still robbed of a lifetime together. He was unable to grow old with those he loved, instead subjected to violent and often cruel prison conditions. And Brown is considered one of the luckier defendants. The truth of the matter is that there are thousands more like Alfred Dewayne Brown who are still trapped inside of a system that is structurally opposed to his very being - Brown himself watched mentally ill defendants be executed without ever receiving adequate care. There are still millions without access to the pro bono efforts of a few lawyers, instead shackled to a public defense system that is overworked, underprepared, and demoralized. There are still countless people -- especially during this national pandemic -- that are wronged and robbed of justice, that must count their days in unsanitary conditions and are even more likely to contract the novel coronavirus.

But before all of this perfect concoction of probabilities could ever have happened, Stolarz had to believe in Brown's innocence. He had to oppose dozens of corrupt and powerful relationships and recognize the broken foundations of the criminal justice system that he had endorsed for so long. Through this case, I have learned that defending the indigent is not the same as championing a particular cause or issue, but rather each client is the cause. Public defenders are not on the forefront of glamorous, high-impact litigation or valorized through other types of publicly covered law reforms; they do work in the trenches, catching those who slip through the cracks and fighting for the rights of their clients on the ground level.

Perhaps it was the intrigue of a new internship or more likely my exploration of a career path, but the prisoners' letters and stories such as Brown's have kindled an insatiable desire to *scrutinize*. Hearing about how my hometown of Harris County executes more people than any other *state* is different than seeing lived experiences inked onto paper. In my internship, I pour over records for viable leads to reply with: a resurfaced recording, a biased juror. I investigate overarching structures like qualified immunity that incentivize police abuse of power.

The work is not glamorous like *How to Get Away With Murder's* depictions, but I know these efforts are an *integral* part of championing a just system and not just a system. People on death row are people that society has left behind at the nadir of their lives. Some of the writers corroborate descriptions of squalid prison conditions with dead roaches (hence the gloves). Others' letters ring with defeat. Every plea I shred, every case Ms. Alcala rejects, reminds me that my hope--and

help--less is *nothing* compared to the defeat the prisoners face when the guards do not bring them mail back.

But I *know* that the effort is worth it in order to save the lives of those like Alfred Dewayne Brown which is why I believe that public defenders ought to be given resources to adequately represent their clients. Furthermore, I believe that the general public must disavow the relationship between prosecutors and judges as well as prosecutors and police task forces so that all evidence is accessible to both sides of the case. Our votes are our voices and the masses must demonstrate their discontent with the criminal (in)justice system by instead electing progressive prosecutors, judges, and other representatives who focus on rehabilitation over the traditional method of rehabilitation, who prioritize people over plea bargains, and who look towards equity, not just equality. We all must push these demands forwards to our respective representatives to fulfill our part in the fight for freedom and champion a just system, not just a system.