

Repentance and forgiveness forty years after a lie

by [Jacob Baynham](#) in the [May 27, 2015](#) issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) A lie landed Ricky Jackson, 58, on death row at age 18. For the past 39 years, the particulars of his life have been dictated by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, making him the longest-serving wrongfully convicted person in American history.

Now back in East Cleveland, he sat minutes away from the street corner that 40 years ago was home to a store run by Robert and Anna Robinson. The store sold money orders, and every week an agent would come to collect the payments and settle the accounts.

On May 19, 1975, that agent was Harold Franks. He arrived at the store with a leather valise containing blank money order notebooks and \$429 in cash. After Franks finished his business and stepped outside, a man hit him on the head with a pipe, trying to tear the bag from his hands. Another man pressed a .38-caliber revolver into Franks's torso and fired. The gunman shot Anna Robinson also. She lived, but Franks died.

The police arrived and canvassed the crowd. Eddie Vernon, 12, stepped forward. He said he'd seen what happened on his way home from school.

Detectives returned the next day and met Vernon at the Robinsons' house. Robert Robinson offered Vernon \$50 to tell the police what he knew.

Eugene Terpay, the lead investigator in the case, fed Vernon details—consciously or not—until Vernon could describe to three separate juries how he had watched two men murder Franks and then jump into a car and speed away.

But that wasn't enough. Terpay needed names. And within a few days Vernon gave him some—those of three young men from the neighborhood. Vernon said that Wiley Bridgeman drove the getaway car, his younger brother Ronnie was the man who hit Franks on the head, and the shooter was Ricky Jackson.

A week later, police searched Jackson's and the Bridgemans' homes without warrants. They found no physical evidence connecting the young men to the crime. Nevertheless, they took them to jail.

"We knew we were innocent," Jackson said. "We were going to fight this."

The police interrogated them separately, telling each one that the others had confessed. Jackson testified that when he refused to sign a confession, Terpay choked and kicked him, calling him a "stupid n——." (Terpay denied this in court.) None of them accepted plea deals that could have reduced their sentences to a maximum of 15 years in prison.

At Jackson's trial, the prosecutor built his case entirely on the testimony of Vernon, who was then 13. On the stand, Vernon's testimony was riddled with inconsistencies. Seven youths from the neighborhood testified that they'd heard Vernon say Jackson hadn't done it. Jackson's mother accounted for his whereabouts on the day of the crime.

Wiley Bridgeman had already been convicted on the same evidence. Later Ronnie Bridgeman was found guilty, too. After the jury verdict, the judge sentenced Jackson to death.

Two months later, Jackson went to death row at the penitentiary in Lucasville, Ohio.

"You had to devise ways of keeping yourself sane," Jackson said.

He read a lot and prayed. He used his imagination to create a place he could retreat to inside his head.

Appeals pushed back Jackson's execution date. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court deemed Ohio's death penalty unconstitutional and the sentences of everyone on death row were commuted to life in prison.

As Jackson was moved around to different facilities, he sought to maintain a sense of humanity.

"I tried to be the kind of person my mother wanted me to be," he says. "I was a guy in prison. But they were never going to make me a prisoner."

His mother's health failed in 2008. His brother said he'd bring her to visit, but never did.

"Then I got that dreaded phone call," Jackson said. "That was my most hopeless moment."

But he remembered what his mother told him on the phone the last time he heard her voice. "You're going to get out of this," she said. "But you've got to stay focused."

Another inmate had told him about the Ohio Innocence Project, which represents prisoners who claim they were wrongfully convicted. They agreed to take his case.

Brian Howe, the OIP staff attorney who represented Jackson, wondered what could bring Vernon forward decades later to recant his testimony.

"Ninety-nine times out of 100, a person in that situation is going to take it to their grave," Howe said.

In 2011, a journalist wrote an article for Cleveland Scene magazine about the likelihood that Jackson and the Bridgeman brothers were innocent. Vernon refused to talk to the writer. But two years later, when his pastor asked him about the story, Vernon burst into tears. He was ready, he said. It was time to step forward again, this time to tell the truth.

Last November, Jackson and Vernon were in a Cleveland courtroom together again. Vernon was terrified of being sent to prison for perjury. But the need to come clean outweighed his fear. Vernon testified that he hadn't seen Franks die. He said the police had coerced him into testifying and got mad whenever he got cold feet. They had threatened to send his parents to jail.

After Vernon's recantation, Jackson took the stand.

"Regardless of what happens here today," he said, "somebody heard the truth for once."

The state withdrew its case. Jackson walked out of the courtroom unshackled. He joined Ronnie and Wiley Bridgeman, who had been released previously, for a tearful celebratory meal at Red Lobster.

Now Jackson's schedule is busy with speaking engagements at universities and nonprofits. A court recently ordered that he be paid a little more than \$1 million—half of the total tax-free sum Ohio will eventually give him. Jackson can also sue for lost wages and punitive damages. For now, he lives on money OIP helped raise.

"Prison didn't make me who I am, but the ordeal did," he said. "I like the person that I turned out to be."

The conversation turned to Vernon.

"Even when I was in prison I feel like I had a better life," Jackson said. "He had three ghosts following him around. Despite what people say, without him, we'd still be in prison. He's the one who put us there, and he was the one who eventually got us out. All is forgiven in my book."

On a recent morning, Vernon sat in a pew at his church, the Emmanuel Christian Center, as a Narcotics Anonymous group meets downstairs. He's 52 now.

"I feel so bad about how I did those guys," he said. "They said they forgave me, but how can they forgive me for taking away all those years?"

Vernon abused alcohol and crack for 17 years and spent time in prison. After he got out, he found peace in the church, although he was terrified by the ninth commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." It seemed written for him. But Vernon found a God who offered forgiveness. And two months ago, in church, he met and hugged Jackson, who offered forgiveness, too. Now Vernon is trying to forgive himself.

Soon after that morning, Vernon planned to meet Jackson for a meal of chicken and greens at his pastor's house. It would be the third time he had seen Jackson since his release.

"I can't take all of it back, I know I can't," Vernon said, hitting his knee. "I keep living with it."

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