Freed prisoners to discuss wrongful convictions

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Wednesday, Feb. 03 2010

COLUMBIA, Mo. -- Three men sent to prison for murder but later released are coming together in Columbia on Wednesday night to draw public attention to wrongful convictions.

Josh Kezer, Darryl Burton and Dennis Fritz will speak at the University of Missouri journalism school after meeting with local lawyers earlier in the day.

Kezer was released from prison last year after a Cole County judge ruled that prosecutors improperly withheld key evidence from his defense attorneys. He was accused in the 1992 death of a southeast Missouri nursing student.

Burton was released in 2008 after 24 years in prison for a St. Louis gas station shooting.

Fritz was convicted of killing a 21-year-old woman in Oklahoma before DNA evidence proved his innocence. His case became the subject of best-selling author John Grisham’s first nonfiction book.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Exonerated men speak out on wrongful convictions

By Victoria Guida
February 4, 2010 | 12:01 a.m. CST

COLUMBIA — Twenty-four years is almost a quarter of a century. It's also the amount of time 47-year-old Darryl Burton spent in prison for a crime he did not commit.

Burton was sentenced to 75 years in prison after "snitch witnesses" — people facing jail time who testify against defendants in order to receive leniency or immunity — testified that he had murdered another man, Burton said. Wednesday night, he and two other exonerated men shared their stories.

Burton, Dennis Fritz and Josh Kezer spoke of their wrongful convictions at an event sponsored by the Midwestern Innocence Project. The talk began at Campus Bar and Grill and ended with the three men speaking at Neff Auditorium.

Burton said entering jail was "dehumanizing" and began to describe the process in detail, to which Kezer became visibly upset. Burton also relived stories of other inmates getting raped, killed or committing suicide.

"If it's one person in prison (who is innocent), there's one too many," Burton said. "I was shown that there is a place called hell, and I've experienced it."

Fritz, a former high school science teacher and track coach as well as the subject of John Grisham's "The Innocent Man," also spoke passionately about the harms of prison.

"It tears at your soul and at your heart and your family," said Fritz, who served 12 years in prison. "I've been on a roller coaster ride through hell."

Fritz and Kezer were also convicted based on the testimony of "snitch witnesses."
The Midwestern Innocence Project, which has two full-time lawyers and many volunteers, works to free wrongfully convicted inmates in Missouri, Oklahoma, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and Arkansas. While the event was a fundraiser, project board member Steve Weinberg was unsure of how many donations they would receive.

"If we make $1,000, I'll be happy," Weinberg said.

The project suggested donations from $100 to $1,000, based on the donor's relationship to the organization. About 50 to 100 people attended the event.

"I think the Innocence Project itself makes us aware that the criminal justice system is flawed," Missouri School of Journalism professor John Fennell said. "They're not only doing the people behind bars a service but also the whole system a service."

Some in attendance, like Reggie Williams, came because they were connected to people in prison. Williams' adopted son is currently incarcerated, and Williams said he was glad the Innocence Project held such events.

"Most people don't get involved because of the perception about people in prison," Williams said.

Kezer too addressed the innocent men still behind bars.

"This is not about me," Kezer said. "This isn't about (the volunteers)."

Then he asked a couple, whose son is currently in prison, to stand.

"This is about their son."
MU Children's Hospital could benefit from radio contest

By Rachel Post
February 4, 2010 | 12:01 a.m. CST

COLUMBIA — If it is truly better to give than to receive, Fulton resident Frank Winter had a pretty good birthday.

Winter, who was celebrating his 62nd birthday Wednesday, brought three friends to Culver's on Broadway Bluff Drive to vote for Y107 (KTXY/106.9 FM) in North America's "Most Caring Radio Station" contest, sponsored by Children's Miracle Network.

The contest began Jan. 18 and will end at 10:59 p.m. on Friday. The station that receives the most votes will be awarded $50,000 for its sponsored children's hospital.

"I always felt that it is good to give to charity," Winter said.

Winter heard the contest promoted on Y107 and brought his friends — one of whom was Frank Frevert, the mayor of New Franklin — to Culver's to vote on their way to a celebratory lunch at a nearby pizza place.

Frevert said helping donate to Children's Hospital struck a chord with him because he has a grandson, Blake, who is a leukemia survivor. Frevert, who admitted he is not computer savvy, received help with voting from Molly Myers, who works at Children's Hospital and is the Children's Miracle Network coordinator.

"I am blown away by the support of the community," Myers said.

Anyone, even non-Columbia residents, can vote for Y107. Brandy Forrest, Children's Miracle Network major gift development officer, said she has family in New Orleans voting for Y107.
Voting took place at two other businesses on Wednesday: Kaldi's Coffee House on Ninth Street and HyVee on West Broadway. Myers said the hospital and the radio station used Facebook, flyers, word of mouth, e-mail and events such as those around town Wednesday to publicize the fundraising campaign.

**MU Children's Hospital needs about $13 million in donations or other funding to complete a major transformation slated to be finished this fall. When the project is completed, the hospital's inpatient and outpatient care units will relocate from floors six and seven at University Hospital to Columbia Regional Hospital.**

Meyers said the standard of care will improve because it will allow for private rooms, versus the current semi-private rooms. The top two floors will encompass inpatient services, and the remaining four will encompass women's health and children's services.

Although Y107 began near the bottom of the list when the contest began, Wednesday the station was in first place ahead of WKLH 96.5, serving the much larger area of Milwaukee, Wis.

“First place is a great accomplishment,” said Matt Splett, MU Health Care media coordinator. “We are thrilled so many people are voting, but at this point we still have 48 hours left.”

Readers can vote and check the contest results at the Children's Miracle Work Web site.
Healing touch for national bird

Three eagles get treatment at MU center.

By Janese Heavin

They are a national symbol of freedom and strength, but sometimes even bald eagles need a helping hand.

Veterinary medicine student Kathryn Kettenbach, vice president of the raptor project, hopes that the unusual number of eagles at the center indicates the public is more aware of the rehabilitation project.

Last month, three injured bald eagles were taken to the Raptor Rehabilitation Project at the University of Missouri. That’s an unusually high number: Typically, the center sees only four or five bald eagles over the course of an entire year, said Kathryn Kettenbach, a third-year veterinary student and vice president of the rehabilitation program.

She hopes the increase is a sign that the public is more aware of the project, which aims to heal injured raptors and return them to the wild.

“Maybe the public is more aware and willing to catch them and help get them to us.” Kettenbach said.

The Raptor Rehabilitation Project occupies a wing of the veterinary teaching hospital at the University of Missouri’s College of Veterinary Medicine. A faculty member advises the group, but anyone can participate in the project, said Tracey Berry, spokeswoman for the school.

Right now, about 45 volunteers — including veterinary students, students from other disciplines and community members — take turns caring for the birds.

Hawks and owls are the most common patients. Eagles require more experienced handlers because they are aggressive and have pointy beaks and talons that can do serious damage if someone is not careful, Kettenbach said. Bald eagles also can be finicky eaters: One currently in the program’s care will eat only fish.

The eagle that most recently arrived at the center was named Manhattan. It was found hobbling around in the woods in Montgomery County last week. The bird, thought to be male, cannot fly, is underweight and also had some tissue inflammation. Yesterday, staff diagnosed Manhattan with a bone infection expected to be treatable, Kettenbach said.
Another eagle, who earned the name Screwball, was brought to the center last month after his toes were caught in a leg-hold trap.

“We’re still exploring options for that bird at this point,” Kettenbach said. “We’re treating an infection where the trap caught it, but at this point we haven’t determined what the outcome will be.”

A third eagle, a female dubbed Eagle Rare, was found near Paris, Mo., with a broken wing that has since been stabilized with pins. She’s healing well and likely will be released, Kettenbach said.

Releasing eagles into the wild is a little trickier than releasing other raptors. The birds need to be released near water in a rural area and should not be released near other eagles during mating season, Kettenbach said. The last eagle to be rehabilitated at the center was released in May along the Missouri River near Hartsburg.

If returning them to the wild is not possible, the center sometimes keeps raptors for educational purposes. Eagles, however, are too taxing on the project’s resources to keep, so those birds would be placed with an organization or sanctuary if their release is not possible.

Reach Janese Heavin at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jheavin@columbiatribune.com.