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Exonerated prisoners put a face on the system

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When State Senator Gloria Romero recites the Pledge of Allegiance, she stops after "with liberty and justice." She does not say the last two words: "for all."

In her speech at "The Faces of Wrongful Conviction" conference on Saturday, Romero said that many Californians are lucky enough to enjoy the liberties guaranteed to them by law, but the individuals who fall victim to a far-from-perfect criminal justice system are not.

The conference, held this past weekend at UCLA, revolved around more than a dozen individuals who had been convicted of crimes they did not commit.

One by one, the exonerated individuals walked on stage, introduced themselves, and told the audience how many years the state of California had "stolen" from them.

In front of a large projection screen, they solemnly stood side by side, facing the audience as if they were part of a large criminal lineup. Behind them, 187 pairs of handcuffs hung on two large black panels. Each of the 17 exonerated people present hung up 11 pairs of handcuffs, representing themselves and 10 other wrongfully convicted individuals.

Larry Marshall, a law professor at Stanford Law School and cofounder of the Center on Wrongful Convictions, called for one second of silence for each year of incarceration served by the exonerated individuals. In total, the silence lasted more than five minutes.

Throughout the day, experts, scientists, lawyers, activists and exonerated individuals discussed the most pressing issues surrounding wrongful conviction, the death penalty and alleged problems with the state's criminal justice system in general.

In one room, an exonerated person shared his or her story every 20 minutes.

Harold Hall was wrongfully convicted in 1990 of a double homicide and rape and sentenced to life in prison without parole. In 2004, he was released after postconviction DNA tests confirmed his innocence.

During his 19 years in prison, Hall did not let his family come see him because he did not want to feel the homesickness.

"I knew I had to prove I was innocent. I knew I had to hurry up and get home," he said.

For those 19 years, Hall spent his time reading everything he could, including magazines, newspapers and law books pertaining to advances in DNA identification technology and its uses in cases similar to his.

"(Correctional officers) thought I was crazy," Hall said. "I would just get on my typewriter and type. I wouldn't leave my cell except for breakfast, dinner and work."

But the work paid off. In 2004, in addition to earning his GED, Hall got his sentence reversed and won his freedom.

He said he will never forget the time that was stolen from him, but feels he has made a smooth transition into life outside of prison. Hall felt he was prepared because he had wanted nothing else.

"I knew I was going to get out, I just didn't know when," he said.

Gloria Killian, who served almost 18 years after being convicted of murder, was the only

exonerated woman present. She spoke about the criminal justice system's treatment of girls and women.

Killian described her experience in prison as "horrendous and appalling," but instead of harboring bitterness and anger, she emphasized moving on.

She said her ordeal has motivated her to fight for the freedom of others who are not as lucky as her.

"I feel bound and driven to help the people that I left behind. I got out alive, but now I also have the opportunity to do that for them," she said. "I have to do that for them."

Killian has since founded the Action Committee For Women in Prison. She now serves as executive director.

She said if she did not make an effort to help, "what happened to me is meaningless. It means (the criminal justice system) stole my life and smashed it to pieces."

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