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Free at Last, Wrongly Jailed Man Fights for Others Inside

By JULIA RAPPAPORT

Darryl Hunt spent 19 years and six months of his life in prison for a crime he did not commit. But he is not angry, never was.



“I was never angry because I knew I was innocent,” Mr. Hunt said Wednesday during a conversation with the Gazette. He was visiting the Island for the first time to speak at a screening of *The Trials of Darryl Hunt*, the HBO documentary which follows his case. “I was hurt and I was disappointed and I was scared, but no,” Mr. Hunt continued, “I was never angry.”

The screening, part of the Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival summer series, was only the latest stop for Mr. Hunt, a man whose journey has taken him from the rough neighborhoods of Winston-Salem, N.C. to the red carpet of the Sundance Film Festival and back. He now works in the city as founder and director of the Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice, a nonprofit organization which assists

individuals who have been wrongly incarcerated, helps ex-offenders reacclimate to life outside prison walls and advocates for changes in the judicial system. His journey, he said, is not uncommon. “This is not a unique story. It happens to so many people,” Mr. Hunt explained.

Darryl Hunt was born in Winston-Salem, a city defined by racism. “Just in the name alone, you can tell,” he said. “There used to be two towns. Winston was the black side of town and Salem, you’ve heard of Old Salem? It was the white side.”

He never knew his father, and his mother died when he was nine years old. His grandparents raised him and when they both died his 13th birthday, his aunt and uncle adopted him. When he was 15, his aunt passed away and he dropped out of

school. “I wasn’t really an educational person,” Mr. Hunt explained. So he moved to California and worked for a few years as a dishwasher and studied for the general educational development exam. At 18, he moved back to Winston-Salem to collect a trust fund left for him by his grandfather and began looking for a job. “I had a dream of working with the city of Winston-Salem in the street division,” he said. It was the job his grandfather had held for 36 years. “I wanted to be just like him,” he said.

It was then that Mr. Hunt met Sammy Mitchell, a slightly older man with a criminal history. One August morning in 1984, after an evening of drinking together, Mr. Hunt and Mr. Mitchell passed by the local convenience store. The clerk, Donna, said the police had left a message inside asking Sammy to call. “A white woman had been raped and killed. The man who called 911 identified himself as Sammy Mitchell,” Mr. Hunt explained this week. “They asked him if he made the call. He said no. They asked for an alibi. Sammy gave them my name. That’s how I got involved.”

The police questioned Mr. Hunt, asked if it was Sammy’s voice on the tape. He said no. The police left, but they came back with more questions. Between August 10 and Sept. 11, Mr. Hunt spoke with the Winston-Salem police 12 times. On Sept. 11, they asked him to come down to the station and take a lie detector test. He did. That night, the police came to his house and arrested Mr. Hunt on charges of raping and murdering Deborah Sykes, a white copy editor at the Winston-Salem Sentinel. “I wasn’t scared because I hadn’t done anything,” Mr. Hunt said.

Nor was he scared when the police stripped him of his belongings and put him alone in an 8 by 10 foot cell without windows or ventilation. In the cell he stayed, for the nine months before the trial began. The trial, in front of a white judge and an all-white jury, lasted three weeks, but still, Mr. Hunt was not scared. “I believed in the system, I believed in the truth. Tell the truth and the truth will set you free,” he said. “I knew I didn’t commit the crime.”

The court appointed Mr. Hunt a young attorney, Mark Rabil, who had been practicing law for four years. This was his first murder case. The prosecution had evidence: pubic hair and saliva from the perpetrator. They did not match Mr. Hunt’s. They had witnesses too: a member of the Ku Klux Klan and a cocaine-addicted prostitute who had been in and out of a mental institution. “I believed the jury was hearing the evidence as it was and I would be found not guilty,” Mr. Hunt said. And then came the verdict: guilty. “It was a high-profile case. A white woman had been raped and murdered. They needed a conviction and I was an unemployed African American with no family,” Mr. Hunt explained.

Three days of deliberations followed. Mr. Hunt escaped the death penalty by one vote. “The foreman of the jury didn’t believe I was guilty,” Mr. Hunt explained. But for the young defendant, there was no real difference between a sentence of death or life in prison. “It was when I actually heard the words guilty that I got scared. It was like they had just took my life. You’re helpless,” he said.

In 1989, Mr. Hunt was awarded a new trial. His lawyers requested that DNA evidence be considered. The court said there was none. “They flat out lied,” Mr. Hunt said. “They had it in their files. There was a rape kit the FBI had done.” The trial was held in a predominantly white, rural North Carolina town. The jury, again, was all white. Deliberations lasted less than an hour, and again, Mr. Hunt was found guilty. In 1994, he went back to court. This time DNA evidence from the rape kit was used. It did not match Mr. Hunt’s. “They said I did not ejaculate or that after I killed and raped her, someone else came along and raped her, all to justify keeping me in prison,” Mr. Hunt said. Again he was sent back to prison.

It was before this hearing that filmmakers Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg learned of Mr. Hunt’s trials. In 1993, a private investigator working on the case called them and said he believed Mr. Hunt was wrongly accused. He asked them to come to North Carolina and film the trial. When Mr. Hunt was again found guilty in 1994, the film stalled. “They had to stop the project because they could not get funding without a happy ending,” Mr. Hunt said.

But in 2001, thanks in large part to Mr. Rabil, who continued to fight doggedly for Mr. Hunt and charged him no fee, the court ordered the prosecution to enter the DNA into a national data bank and filming continued. The DNA led to Willard Brown, a Winston-Salem man who had served time for another brutal rape. Mr. Brown later confessed to the rape and murder of Deborah Sykes and, on Christmas eve, 2003, Mr. Hunt was released from jail. In February 2004, a superior court judge dismissed the case against Mr. Hunt with prejudice, meaning he can never be tried in the murder again.

“When I got out, I tried to rebuild my life,” Mr. Hunt said. While in prison, Mr. Hunt was married to the daughter of a man in the community who had fought to get Mr. Hunt a free trial (they are still married), but he had no job and no savings. “I applied for a job and they told me I was missing 19 years of my resume,” Mr. Hunt said.

So, he went to work for himself and for the thousands like him who have suffered at the hands of the American justice system. “I have no faith in the system no more,” Mr. Hunt said. “I have faith in God and in people to change the system.”

In 2005, he started the Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice. Funded through grants, private donations and the money Mr. Hunt receives from speaking engagements, the project has worked with over 1,200 people and found over 500 jobs for former inmates. Only three people who have participated in the program have returned to prison. “We all make mistakes in our lives and people forgive us,” Mr. Hunt said. “When you’re convicted of a crime, people don’t want to forgive you. They don’t want to give you opportunities.”

Mr. Hunt’s efforts have led to a death penalty moratorium bill in the state, helped establish new state laws requiring information sharing with defense counsel, and contributed to the creation of a state Innocence Inquiry Commission, a body with

subpoena power. “The system is not a bad system,” Mr. Hunt told the Gazette. “It’s the people who run the system. They bring in their prejudices and biases, their racism and sexism and all their other isms. This is why the system has failed.”

When he was released from prison, the state of North Carolina awarded Darryl Hunt \$385,545. He later settled a lawsuit with the city of Winston-Salem for \$1.6 million. For more information on Mr. Hunt or the film, visit online darrylhuntproject.org.

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