

The Innocents

Idealistic law students labor to free the wrongly accused.

BY

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The letters are desperate. They are filled with obvious lies, or sorrowful grievances, or unrestrained rage, or childlike hope. They are peppered with grammatical errors of the uneducated and the legalese of the jailhouse lawyer.

*I have been in prison for more than 15 years . . . I need help Desperatly.
The DA is stopping me at every turn . . .*

More than 2,000—some scrawled, some in careful script—have been meticulously logged. They're stacked beside the fax machine and on the hand-me-down desks and filing cabinets of the Georgia Innocence Project. This is a threadbare operation that relies on the idealism of unpaid law students who take up residence at the mismatched desks or cluster around a small table in front of the executive director's desk; one favors a private spot in a utility closet. They pore over the tales of rapists and murderers, giving each claim of innocence a fair shot even if it seems preposterous.

Somewhere in these piles is another person sitting in a cold cell, breathing stale, cigarette-stained air, doing time for a crime he didn't commit. The interns long to find him. The innocent. The one they can exonerate.

FIRST LESSON: The search for justice is painful.

If you want to believe that most everyone is innocent, you'll discover that most prison inmates really are guilty. If you think most of them really are criminals, you'll find cases that haunt you with lack of proof. If you believe in the system, you'll realize that it's sloppy and uncaring. If you believe in the quest for truth, you'll learn that truth is almost impossible to find.

In the cluttered, windowless Midtown office of the Georgia Innocence Project, executive director Aimee Maxwell tries to tell the interns what to expect. But she knows that, in the end, they will have to learn this lesson on their own.

Nationwide, 164 people have been exonerated by innocence projects. The original was founded by lawyers Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld in 1992 and based in New York City. In 1999, the New York group's work led to the exoneration of Calvin Johnson, who had spent 16 years in a Georgia prison for a rape he didn't commit. In late 2005, their

efforts helped free Georgian Robert Clark, falsely imprisoned for 24 years.

In 2002, two Georgia State University law students approached the Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and asked simply: Why can't we do this here? The question ultimately came to Maxwell, 44, who ran a criminal defense training program for lawyers. Self-effacing and soft-spoken, she's a natural champion of the underdog. Within four months, she raised \$100,000, gathered a board of directors (which now includes Calvin Johnson), found office space donated by ChoicePoint (an information broker that has a DNA testing subsidiary) and formed the Georgia Innocence Project.

At the time, Maxwell had a job offer from a blue-chip law firm. She turned it down and now lives and breathes the Innocence Project, acting as a surrogate mother to the interns and a personification of the Lady of Justice to convicted inmates.

*I'm writing to ask you for help again
and to make you aware that I understand
you dropping [sic] my case because
they say there's no DNA to prove me
innocent. But if there is a State law to
force me to take a DNA test to prove me
guilty of a charge I haven't been arrested for then the State should have
to give me
a DNA test to prove me innocent of a
crime that I was convicted of!*

But if there's no DNA from the crime scene, we can't help you! Sometimes the interns wish they could dash back letters filled with as many exclamation points and as much frustration as the ones they receive. Instead, they vent to each other and then practice their best lawyerly skills, drafting coolly polite responses.

So when someone has a particularly weak claim or a case without a shred of evidence that can be tested, the interns dismiss it as cleanly as they can. Periodically, they gather in a borrowed conference room with Maxwell to review the cases.

Lindsay Reese, 22, a slender, married student who lives in Alpharetta, readjusts her wire-rimmed glasses nervously as she opens her files. She tucks a blond strand behind her ear and begins in a methodical tone: "File 86 is getting a 'no' letter. There's no DNA. File 398 is getting a 'no' letter. There was no rape kit done. File 1246 thinks you are a man. *Dear sir. Mr. Aimee Maxwell.* He's going to get a 'no' letter. It was child molestation, and there's no DNA."

She has one case she has been running over and over in her mind. His name is Ira Glenn White. He was convicted of breaking into a woman's apartment, hiding in the dark and smoking a cigarette until she got home, then raping and sodomizing her. He is serving two life sentences plus 60 years.

"[The victim] said he was 5'5" to 5'7" . This guy is 5'11". She said that she didn't have to look up at him, but she was only 5'1". My husband is 10 inches taller than me. So I asked him to stand kind of close to me. I never really noticed it before, but I do have to look up to

him,” says Reese. “And then he sent us a copy of the photos she was shown in the lineup. She described her attacker as light-skinned. This guy was the only light-skinned person. The one guy. I looked at the pictures, and five of them were dark-skinned. You know, it’s kind of suspicious.”

Maxwell directs Reese, a second-year law student at Georgia State, to file an open records request to review the district attorney’s file.

Melissa Arcila, a native of Colombia, is a disarmingly blunt 22-year-old law student from the University of Georgia. She formed Students for Latino Empowerment at UGA. Her top case involves an inmate convicted of raping a woman at gunpoint in the back seat of her car while her 9-year-old son crouched under the dashboard. The inmate was sunk when his own fingerprint analyst linked him to a partial thumbprint on the doorknob. He insists on his innocence though, and Arcila wonders just how much you can tell from a partial thumbprint.

Marcus Sellars, a second-year student from Mercer University Law School in Macon, who sits across from Reese, hasn't had much to work with. He brings up one complicated case involving rape, sodomy and kidnapping for ransom. Three life sentences plus 20 years,

Sellars launches into an explanation of the two types of sperm found in the rape investigation, motile and nonmotile, including some abnormal sperm that had two tails. It's clear the inmate has been wondering for 25 years whether someone could prove those weren't his sperm.

"He doesn't have abnormal sperm?" asks Maxwell.

"Yeah [he does], but the fact of the matter is, the sperm were never tested to determine who they belonged to."

At 36, Sellars is the oldest intern. He has an entire career behind him, having burned out as a history teacher in inner-city middle and high schools. He's also the only African-American. He grew up in Rochester, New York, in rough, crime-ridden neighborhoods. He says of about

20 childhood buddies, he's the only one who went to college. Five are dead. Ten are in prison—or have been.

For Sellars, law is not just a career. It's a quest to exonerate. He has two brothers, an uncle and a cousin in federal prisons, and he believes them when they say they are not guilty. He's quiet when the other interns banter and prod each other as they sit shoulder to shoulder in the cramped office. He hasn't even told them the story of his background and relatives. He doesn't want to impose his experience on their idealism.

Sellars leans across the table with a question for Maxwell: "Does this carry any weight with you that this was 25 years ago and he still says 'I'm not guilty'?"

"No," she retorts. The interns laugh at the crispness of her response, particularly since she's known for her soft-heartedness. "There are things that make me think they're not guilty, but that's not one of them."

SECOND LESSON: Believing in innocence is one thing. Proving it is another.

There's no better mark of proof than DNA, the tiniest shards of identity. When you walk into a room, you leave not just fingerprints but a few random skin cells. A hair. Perhaps a trace of saliva on a water glass. If someone could gather those infinitesimal pieces of you, they could trace your presence on the scene. They could prove that this genetic detritus belonged to you and not to someone else. Or that it could not possibly have belonged to you, that someone else had been there.

Fifteen or 20 years ago, when most of the inmates now appealing to the Project were convicted, the best anyone could do was match blood types or compare hairs microscopically. For example, in Calvin Johnson's case, an analyst testified that he had type O blood and that he was a "secretor"—his blood type could be found in saliva and semen—the same as the rapist. Yet those facts would be true for about 40 percent of African-Americans, explains Greg Hampikian, an Innocence

Project board member and forensics expert. The hair evidence, in fact, did not match Johnson's.

To understand DNA testing, think back to high school biology. DNA is made up of patterns of nucleotides known as A, G, C and T. DNA tests look for "short tandem repeats" (STRs) sequences of A, G, C and T that repeat at a given location. For example, four repetitions on the chromosome from your mother and seven on the chromosome from your father would make you a "47" at that location.

In the early days, analysts needed a large quantity of DNA and only tested one or two locations. Today's labs can replicate DNA to create larger samples and compare STRs in 13 locations. When Calvin Johnson finally had his DNA tested—16 years after he entered prison—it showed he couldn't have been the rapist. The actual criminal is still at large.

Science is a savior for the wrongly convicted—but only if there's evidence to test. These inmates wore out their

legal appeals long ago. Georgia law now requires evidence to be preserved for at least 10 years after a conviction, but in older cases, the evidence is elusive.

It could be in the court reporter's house, the district attorney's file, a police department storage shed—or destroyed. The interns file open records requests and bounce from one bureaucratic department to another. No one is too fired up about trying to help unearth a long-lost rape kit or pair of panties. Yet the interns know that without the semen or blood stains, they will never uncover an innocent person and set him free.

THIRD LESSON: Innocence endures the test of time.

Clarence Harrison knocks lightly on the door before entering the office. He's a shock of athletic red, with shorts and sleeveless tee and logo-less baseball cap.

It's all so coordinated, except for the enormous silver cross hanging around his neck, but it looks incongruous on this paunchy man with a trim, graying beard.

It's been more than a year and a half since Harrison was released from prison

after serving 17 years for a rape he did not commit, and he still has the air of a modern-day Rip Van Winkle. Harrison stands in the doorway hesitantly until Maxwell spies him from her office. “What’s this outfit?” she prods teasingly.

“Just tryin’ to be comfortable.”

Harrison looks around at the interns, who have swiveled in their chairs to smile at him. “What y’all comin’ up with? Anything good?”

“We’re going to have to visit some courthouses to look at some cases,” responds Arcila. “Look at some shady DA work.”

He laughs. “That’s pretty much it.”

“I just want to see what evidence they’ve got. It doesn’t seem like there will be any. But I think everybody’s shady. I’m just into conspiracy theories.” Arcila’s smile doesn’t seem cynical or conspiratorial at all.

Maxwell shepherds the group into a break room, where the interns rush over to the machine that gives out 25-cent Cokes, then settle around a laminate table. Since Harrison got out of prison, his main avocation has simply been talking about himself.

Before Harrison has a chance to launch into his oft-told tale, Sellars interjects: “Did you run across people who are innocent, they were locked up and you kind of knew they were innocent?” To Sellars, Harrison bears an uncanny resemblance to one of his convicted relatives. He even talks like him. He leans closer because Harrison speaks softly.

“There are people I ran across that I believed were innocent. It’s just that proving they’re innocent, that’s the hard thing to do,” says Harrison.

“What was their demeanor? Was there something about them?” Sellars prods.

Harrison talks about an inmate who never really knew the facts of the crime he was convicted of committing. He only knew what was told in court. As the

years passed in prison, he forgot those details and knew virtually nothing about his own case. Harrison figures if he had committed the crime, he would never have forgotten it.

“It’s just the little things that go unnoticed that tell you whether this person is guilty or innocent.”

Harrison segues into a description of life behind bars. Waking at 5 a.m., eating breakfast at 5:30, lining up for work detail and call at 7, school or trades at 8, or getting thrown in “the hole” for refusing to work. Once he decided to take classes, things improved a little. But he spent hours wandering in the dormitory, the TV droning every day from 4:30 to 11 p.m. Then a fitful sleep on a cot in a cell and waking up to the same damn thing the next day. Some inmates would start fights just to get a little excitement, he says.

“I would prefer that I receive a death penalty than receive another 20 years in prison,” he says. “I think that would be more merciful.”

What about the victim? Did you ever talk to her? Did she ever apologize?

No, Harrison says. He went back to the place where the crime occurred, near a bus stop in the Decatur neighborhood where he once lived, and marveled at how much it had changed. How much everything had changed. Folks didn't have cell phones or computers when he went into prison. His wife divorced him after he was arrested. His two children grew up without him. He is now married to a woman who befriended him and believed in him during his prison stay.

Not being bitter is something he has worked at. He blames the system, not the victim who misidentified him. But when Susan Anton, an intern from Chicago, starts quizzing him about victims, he remarks, "The most heinous crime of all is to be a victim of a victim because a victim shows no mercy."

Sellers has another question. "After 15 or 20 years—let's say it's a life sentence—do you think they would still try to get out, claiming they're innocent?"

“For a man to maintain his innocence for 15 or 20 years, it requires to be looked into,” replies Harrison. “I’m not saying he could be innocent or guilty. It’s our responsibility to make sure justice is always served.”

FOURTH LESSON: You can’t read innocence or guilt on their faces.

Reese and Arcila walk into the vast Justice Center of Clayton County, a faux historical building that looks like a supersized antebellum home, complete with portico and enormous colonnade.

The clerk in the DA’s office has the file ready and ushers them into a cubicle. Reese opens the file and sees a brown paper bag, stapled shut. She fingers it. It’s a cigarette butt, found near the door where the rapist waited for his victim, who was a nonsmoker. “Sweet,” she says.

Yellow legal pad pages describe the case from the DA’s perspective. The victim’s description didn’t exactly match. He was at least four inches too tall. But he had lied about when he received an eviction

notice and moved out. That made his alibi weak, at best. *Ira White and his mom are absolute liars!* the DA wrote.

They flip through, focusing for a few moments on White's lineup photo, in which he is scowling. Does he look guilty? They keep hunting for anything that lists the evidence. They need some clue as to what happened to the stained pants—maybe a snip of cloth, maybe a slide of the semen. Anything with DNA.

“It's not looking too hopeful for this guy,” says Arcila.

“I still have hope,” says Reese.

Did not see knot on ear, the DA noted.

“She double-starred that,” says Arcila.

“Yeah, 'cause that's a problem for her.”

She again absolutely and unequivocally IDs him in court. There is no Q in her mind. The DA hammers in on that identification in closing statements.

“In her mind, he already is the rapist whether he is or not,” says Reese.

The two young women close the file, return it and move on to the microfilm room of the superior court clerk’s office. They find no sign of the other evidence.

Two weeks later, Reese meets White face to face. The name in the file becomes a person, and she can’t help but search for clues of guilt or innocence.

He doesn’t look the way she imagined. He’s too slight. He has narrow shoulders and a thin waist, and though his prison documents confirm that he is 5’11”, he is far from towering. The rape victim had identified her rapist as short and slender. Now that Reese stands before inmate Ira White in a counseling office of the Autry State Prison, she wavers in her conviction that his height was a tip-off that he was the wrong guy.

When he was arrested, White had Jeri curls, but his shaved head now makes him look older. He also has at least two prison-made tattoos: a griffin (part eagle,

part lion) and wolf that cover up an old marijuana leaf tattoo and a small tattoo of “13 1/2” on his hand—”12 jurors, one judge and a half-assed chance,” he explains.

In their meeting, White is almost manically elated by these women who came to visit. He hasn't slept since the day before. With so many hours in prison to ruminate over his case, he remembers specific reports by the date they were issued. He corrects Reese on details. He has collected reams of documents—including one that he says never appeared at trial showing that a hair found on the victim's panties didn't match her or him.

His voice is soft and low but rises, dripping with bitterness, as he rails at the DA: “She knew exactly what she was doing. She knew she had the wrong person, and she did not care.”

Reese and Maxwell warn him that a positive DNA test would doom him to a lifetime in prison. It would be incontrovertible proof of his guilt. “If this were to come back positive, you are not going to get paroled,” says Maxwell, kindly

but firmly. “It’s really risky. I just want to tell you.”

“No worries,” he says, almost cockily, shaking his head.

They promise that they will keep looking for more evidence. So far, they have just the cigarette butt. It’s a start, but ideally, they want to find something more.

As they stand to leave, Maxwell asks him, “Is this what you expected?”

“Not totally—but it’s more than enough,” he says.

“Did you expect us to tell you we were going to get you out tomorrow?” she says teasingly.

“I was hoping so. Hoping against hope,” he says, returning the smile.

“I feel disappointed,” Reese confesses later, as the car whizzes past a monotony of central Georgia pine trees and dead-end diners on the four-hour ride back to Atlanta. “I guess I just wanted to go and

talk to him and have no doubt in my mind.” She dissects each interchange. He didn’t seem aggressive or scary. But could he have been too slick? Was he lying?

“If it’s him, I sat in a room with him, I shook his hand, I gave him respect, and he didn’t deserve it if he’s a rapist,” says Reese, suddenly weighing the possibility of his guilt. “I know I shouldn’t feel that way, especially if I’m going to do criminal defense. But if he did it, then I sat in a room with a rapist who did these terrible things to this woman—and I believed him. And I believed him, and I’m a fool.”

“One way or another, if we find the DNA, we’ll know for sure,” Maxwell reassures her. “Then we’ll never have to doubt.”

A week later, Arcila takes a whirlwind trip to Savannah on behalf of Eric Williams, the man convicted of raping the woman in the car while her son crouched under the dashboard. The partial fingerprint is a little troublesome. But there are some problems with the prosecution’s case too. The victim identified someone

else in the photo lineup, but when police couldn't find that person for a live lineup, they substituted Williams instead. He had an alibi. Co-workers testified that he was driving home from work with them.

"It's so shady," says Arcila dismissively.
"Typical Georgia racist justice."

The last time Arcila was in Savannah, she was wearing green and drinking green beer at a St. Patrick's Day celebration. Now, she is wearing heels and dress pants and headed for the courthouse with fellow intern Susan Anton and Lisa George, the Project's communications director (and only employee besides Maxwell). Arcila is a little on guard, expecting the district attorney's office to stonewall them.

They are ready for her. Boxes of documents rest on a cart in a conference room.

Arcila opens a thin cardboard box and peers into a translucent black bag. She catches her breath as she spies a pair of gray panties with an obvious stain. She doesn't want to touch anything, but she jostles the contents to look. She sees the

door handle, a T-shirt and a pair of work pants but no sign of the lifted fingerprint.

The next day, after a night at a cheap motel outside of town, they leave Savannah's prim 19th century homes and tinsel oaks. The terrain transforms into scraggy marsh as they drive through vacant southeast Georgia towns to Ware State Prison. It is a benign-looking brick building that, without all the menacing barbed-wire fences, could resemble a converted motel. In the distance, prisoners are working in the yard.

The women hand over their driver's licenses, step through metal detectors and follow a prison guard into a lobby that looks jarringly like a school, with shiny floors and little couches and a big round clock. They must wait while the prison completes a shakedown.

Eric Williams walks in, glistening with sweat, still wearing his sunglasses. He's a stocky man with heavy jowls, close-cropped hair and a trim mustache. He smiles and shakes hands and, in fact,

looks rather casual, as if he had visitors like them all the time.

Arcila gives him the usual warning about how DNA evidence could confirm his guilt and ruin his chances of ever getting parole. “Do you want us to go forward, or do you want us to stop?” George asks pointedly.

Williams looks resolute. “I have done some things. I had a temper. But I’m not a rapist.”

Arcila asks him about the fingerprint. How did it get there? “I’d like to know that myself,” he says. “That’s something that has haunted me for 20 years.”

They talk about his past—his time in the military, his previous conviction for aggravated assault. “I’ll do my time for what I deserve, but this is something I did not do,” he insists.

They talk about the trial, his alibi and another rape that police tried but never did pin on him. He will be eligible for parole. But that’s almost beside the point. He says he doesn’t want to live with the

stigma of being a sex offender, with this charge of raping a schoolteacher while her son covered in the car.

As they leave, George once again reminds him that if he's guilty, the DNA test will prove it. He shakes his head and says, once again, that he's not guilty.

Arcila walks out, buoyed, believing him, wishing that she had that fingerprint and could prove, with 21st century technology, that it wasn't his.

FIFTH LESSON: Be patient.

In a loft of Manuel's Tavern, the interns sit in a row on one side of a long set of tables. They look well-groomed but, with the exception of Sellars, who wears a suit, not exactly dressed up. This is the most important moment of their summer, so there's an undercurrent of nervous tension and strained casualness.

Scattered around other tables are the members of the Project's legal advisory board, a set of public defenders and criminal defense attorneys who will decide which, if any, of the interns' cases they

will accept as clients. Without their okay, the Project cannot move forward to file legal motions and test DNA.

Reese rises first, with an aura of confidence and the voice of a courtroom attorney, to present the case of Ira Glenn White.

A battery of questions ensues when she says she wants to take him as client and test the cigarette butt. Have you talked to the jurors? Have you talked to the attorney in the related civil suit over the rape? What about the similar rape that was linked to the case but that he was never charged with?

“What’s the next step short of testing the cigarette butt? What can we still do that won’t cost us a bunch of money?” quizzes Jill Polster, one of the Project’s founders.

Reese sighs heavily, impatiently. She tries again to explain. “I want to file ten motions. I think Aimee is with me on this. We’ll be trying to get the state to pay for

the DNA testing and maybe they'll produce something else.”

She wishes fervently that Maxwell were there to back her up , but a death in the family has forced her to miss this meeting. Polster says bluntly, “I have a problem spending money on the cigarette butt because it's not going to walk him out the door.” Reese's face reddens as Polster suggests she continue working and bring the case back in three months. “You look disappointed.”

“I am, if that stands. I'm disappointed, absolutely. ”

“You want us to take him as a client and file motions to test the DNA,” reiterates September Guy, the other co-founder.

“Yes, absolutely. Yes, I do.”

“Just to get in court, we've got to show that the evidence is conclusive,” Jim Bonner, who is with the Georgia Public Defender Standards Council, says didactically.

“But they admitted it as evidence!”

Reese’s face crumples. Her hand tightly grasps the empty chair next to hers. She takes an audible gulp of water.

“I understand that. You’ve got me persuaded. But I don’t think it’s going to open it up—”

Reese suggests the DNA on the cigarette butt might match the DNA of another convicted rapist, which would cast doubt on White’s conviction. But the board members are not convinced.

“We’re not saying we’re not going to take him [as a client],” says Polster. “I want you to understand that. We’re just saying we have to exhaust every possibility of finding the evidence that will walk him out the door.”

Arcila tries to come to Reese’s defense.

“The biggest issue we have is finding evidence,” she says. “I mean, nobody ever seems to know where it goes. You know what I’m saying? They always give you another phone number, another person, even the court reporter always dies or disappears or something happens . . .”

But it's time to move on. Reese sits down and picks at her cold tuna melt.

By the time Arcila rises to address the silenced room, she has a slim, cocky smile. Hers is not an entirely lost cause. "I'll try to get you excited about a case," she says.

"We're excited," remarks Polster.

"I actually found a pair of underwear that was introduced into evidence as the underwear the victim was wearing."

Arcila goes on to tell about Eric Williams case, his alibi, his lineup, the fingerprint. Surely, after working at a road construction site with liquid asphalt in 90-degree heat (she checked the *Farmer's Almanac*), he would have stunk—and the victim would have noticed that.

The panty stain is "nice and crusty," and Hampikian told Arcila it would be no problem to recover DNA.

She thought the fingerprint would be a major obstacle, but it turns out that these defense attorneys relish the thought of disproving a so-called fingerprint expert. In 1987, the analyst used a magnifying glass to match a partial thumbprint. Today, investigators would use a computer comparison.

“Here we have definitive evidence,” says Arcila. “The question is whether we believe enough in the case to test the evidence.”

“I like it. Let’s take it,” says Polster. “I think it’s worth it on the fingerprint evidence alone.”

“That would be awesome,” sighs attorney Gerard Kleinrock.

Sitting in the corner, Sellars has hardly said a word. He put his greatest effort into a case that blew apart with one phone call. He thought perhaps there was something fishy about the case of an inmate convicted in the armed robbery of a liquor store. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation had uncovered a mask

worn by the robber but didn't test the hairs found on the mask until two years later. Could they have mistakenly mixed up the sample hairs provided by this inmate, essentially testing the sample as the damning evidence?

The inmate insists he didn't commit the crime. Sellars believed him.

Until the day, out of curiosity, he called the inmate's ex-wife. She, too, had wanted to believe him. But then, in a doorway of their home, she discovered an empty moneybag that belonged to the liquor store. "How did it get there?" she demanded. He said he didn't know. She told Sellars her husband had been a masterful conman. She knew in her heart that he had robbed the store.

"This case was an example of how we try to filter things as carefully as possible," Sellars says serenely, as the other interns mill about at Manuel's and contemplate drinking something stronger than Coke to mark the end of their summer. The cadence of laughter and strains of music fill the room from the bar

below. “We haven’t closed this case, but the door is actively closing. I put all this effort because I thought this guy might have something.”

Sellars isn’t angry about being conned. He isn’t upset that he came to the Legal Advisory Board meeting empty-handed. He plans to continue working with the Innocence Project when he can, traveling from Macon.

“I feel about as excited as I was on day one, today,” he declares. “The excitement hasn’t waned. As long as I’m dealing with the have-nots and the innocents, that’s perfectly fine with me.”

Beyond the angry desperation of the letters, beyond the yearning idealism of the interns, beyond the cold scrutiny of the lawyers, Sellars has the patience to wait to find someone who needs to be set free. “I’ve faced defeat all my life, but I’ve always gotten off the mat to win every time,” he says. “I wouldn’t doubt for one minute that I’ll be part of an exoneration.”

FINAL LESSON: Keep on searching.

Just a few days later, in an effort to console Reese, Maxwell calls a Clayton County assistant DA and asks for a more thorough search for the Ira White evidence. He has a generous offer. Come and look for yourself, he says.

The evidence room is a storage space with metal shelving and boxes marked only by shelf location. Reese heads for the room with evidence slated for destruction. Maxwell takes another look at Section C2, Box 2, the location marked on the evidence sheet. The box is empty.

She scans the entire Section C, then Section B. She's about to join Reese when she randomly peers inside Box 1 in Section D2. She sees the name, "White, Ira Glenn," and like someone momentarily dazed by the opening of a window shade, she pauses. "Oh my God," she says. "I think I've got the evidence."

She asks the Clayton County investigator who accompanied them to take out the contents. An empty envelope. Some

vacuum sweepings and a blue button in a plastic baggie. Then he pulls out the rape kit and a clipping from the stained black pants worn by the victim immediately after the rape.

The assistant DA offers to send the evidence to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation for testing, short-circuiting the usual legal proceedings and saving the project money. The Legal Advisory Board hastily agrees to take White as a client, through an e-mail consensus.

Maxwell and Reese call White, and the prison cooperates by bringing him to the phone. They give him one last chance to back out. He insists on going forward. “We’ve already opened Pandora’s box,” says Maxwell. “Now we get to find out for sure.”