

Exonerated 5 Story

By Sharonne Salaam

Justice 4 the Wrongfully Incarcerated

On December 19, 2002, New York State Supreme Court Justice Charles J. Tejada vacated the convictions of Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana Jr. and Korey Wise for the rape of the Central Park Jogger. These innocent people were known as the Central Park Five. Just before the exoneration the press called this case, **“The Case That Would Never Die”**. Their exoneration was based on the confession of a serial rapist and murderer already in jail, and a positive DNA match of the only blood sample that was found on the jogger. Now after over thirteen years of being labeled sexual predators, these young men are called **“The Exonerated Five”**.

It was in the evening. After sunset on March 19, 1989 that nightmare began. **Kevin Richardson** 14 and **Raymond Santana Jr.** 14 were arrested for Disturbing the Peace in Central Park. Looking back after all these years it seems like yesterday. Those of us who lived through this will never forget. Many of the effects have moved into a place of forgiveness while some challenges of forgiveness still linger. Yusef Salaam often quotes Nelson Mandela and poet Maya Angelou on the importance of forgiveness and how it's the most important thing you can give yourself.

“Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”
-Nelson Mandela

“You should be angry. You must not be bitter. Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. It doesn't do anything to the object of it's displeasure. So use that anger. You write. You paint it. You dance it. You march it. You vote it. You do everything about it. You talk it. Never stop talking it.”
- Maya Angelou

Many of the family members didn't live to see the boys exonerated or forgive themselves and others for the parts they played. They blamed themselves for not knowing the best way to protect, support or defend their children under overwhelming stress and pressure.

As it happened this story concept “Blackman beat and rape white woman” was on the front page of many newspaper for years. The police, the press shaped the story and excited a climate of mass hate. The Black Press like the Amsterdam News, the City Sun, The Daily Challenge and Black Talk Radio and TV like KISS and LIKE IT IS did their best to counter the story as depicted in the white press.

There was no limit to most people's demonstrating mass loathing for our families. No time for facts or evidence. Soon after the boys arrest and long before the trial Donald Trump put full page ads in newspapers asking for the return of the death penalty. People began demonstrating in front of some of their homes. People began crossing the street when we passed. Many took time out of their busy day to cursed us, wish us dead, beaten, raped and spit at us. Often death threats came in the mail.

In our families we all fell into a helpless place knowing that our children and our families were going through this horror. There was no understanding of how people could believe this was possible. Some of our children were assaulted in schools and unsafe in the community. For most of us there was very little help. But supporters came from the activist communities. Elombe and Nomsa Brath from the Patrice Lumumba Coalition were the first to show up with Bill Perkins, an aspiring politician to help. Elombe brought other The December 12 Movement, United African Movement, The Nation of Islam, The Catholic Church Father Lawrence Lucas, House of the Lord, Baptist Ministries. Our family struggle was individual. And, the community did not collectively embrace our pain.

Unlike other communities when crime happens, there was a collective guilt and shame that surrounded Harlem. All eyes were watching. It was not just the boys but all of us. All of us Guilty. All of Harlem guilty. The silent question in the room was why did you do this? What kind of people are you, are we? Why did this happen to us? How do we have to show the world that we are all not like them. We are the good Black people of Harlem.

The first to be arrested were Kevin and Raymond. The boys were held over twenty-four hours before others would join them. Not having seen a woman in the park, the boys were confused and didn't know what to say during police questioning. They wondered what they could say the police would believe so they could go home. The police continued asking the same question over and over adding bits and pieces of information about the case. Who hit her with the rock? Who held her legs down? Who raped her? and asked questions like who were you with in the park, who are your friends? If you tell us you can go home. More police arrived in squad cars at the building complex and took boy after boy into the precinct for questioning. Parents who were aware of this happening were living in fear and terror that their child would be next. It was as if our black and brown boy living here were under siege.

Kevin Richardson ran as he frantically tried to leave Central Park. A policeman grabbed him, hitting his head during his arrest. His bruise was visible to the necked eye. Kevin's mother Grace Cuffee receives a call from the policeman to come get her son. He explains that Kevin would get a Desk Appearance Ticket when she arrives. Grace Cuffee goes to pick him up and get the Desk Appearance Ticket. On her arrival the Desk Appearance Ticket was not ready. Grace heard the phone ring and

bits and pieces of a conversation telling the police to hold them there. A white female jogger was discovered in Center Park raped and laying in a pool of blood. The police became agitated and excited. Raymond's parents hadn't arrived yet. The police began questioning the boys about the rape with and without their parents present. The energy in the police station changed sharply and you could hear it in their voices. They needed to solve this case. The boys still hadn't eaten nor drank water since lunch. Kevin and his mother were escorted into the interrogation room when the ADA Linda Fairstein head of the Sex Crimes Unit arrived with her support team ready. After waiting most of the night with no medicine or food Kevin's ailing mother was near collapse. She had to leave to get her medicine, rest and food. Not knowing when they could leave, Kevin's mother calls his father. Kevin's father arrives and replaces her. By the time Kevin's sister arrives the police were reading Kevin his confession and waiting for him to sign it so they could go home. Kevin Richardson's father died pained from not being able to protect his son. Kevin's mother Grace Cuffee a stroke survivor during the interrogation and his sisters never forgave him for Kevin's conviction.

Santana's father and grandmother arrive. They wait for a Desk Appearance Ticket to leave. Hours pass. The desk appearance ticket never arrives. Santana has to leave for work. Raymond Jr's grandmother, who speaks little English, waits nervously for her grandson's release. They didn't know a call had come into the police station from the Sex Crimes Unit saying hold them for questioning. The police start questioning Raymond Jr. about the rape of the jogger right away. During the questioning Raymond Jr. becomes the translator between the police and his Spanish speaking grandmother. Raymond Santana's father continued his support. His grandmother who sat with him through the interrogation died. She didn't understand what was going on. Raymond Jr. translated as best as he could. When Santana arrived home his son nor grandmother were not there. He went back to the police precinct. It was after his return to the precinct the next day he realized what was going on. There was no Desk Appearance Ticket. It was too late Raymond Jr. had signed the police confession and was under arrest. Santana and grandmother went home without the boy.

Evening, police arrive at 15 year old **Antron McCray's** door and invite him to go down to the precinct. They tell his parents Bobby and Linda McCray that he isn't under arrest. He is just a witness. They ask him to put on the same clothes he had on the night before. He complies. Antron, his parents and the police go to the police precinct together where the interrogation begins. The police began by telling them that they know he was a witness to what happened to the jogger. They would be able to go home as soon as he answered a few questions. The police begin asking questions about what happened to the jogger. Not getting the desired answers. The police start reading him bits and pieces of what they know about the incident. Not knowing anything about the case Antron continues to hold on to his story.

At a point the police asked Linda McCray out of the room and spoke to her in private. While mother is out of the room they spoke to Bobby McCray and enlisted his help with his son so they could go home. Accepting the policeman's word that they could go home Bobby begins to interrogate his son. Bobby starts to question his son in a violent manner just like he is a policeman. Thinking that they could go home soon Bobby gets his son to repeat what the police have been feeding them. Antron McCrays father Bobby McCray died in shame and was estranged from each other. His mother Linda McCray, a kind and gentle woman, was filled with tears of pain and sorrow. Linda McCray continued her support for her son until she died of cancer.

Yusef Salaam 15 and **Korey Wise 16** were next to be invited to the police precinct. Korey's name was not on the list the Detectives have, so one writes his name on the sheet of paper. They are separated into different rooms at the precinct and the interrogation begins when no parent was present. The police follow the same questioning technique used on Kevin and Raymond. Yusef's mother Sharonne Salaam arrives at the police precinct with three others. There she is confronted by ADA Linda Fairstein, ADA Elizabeth Lederer and other Detectives. After Ms. Salaam refuses to give them permission to question her 15 year old son. Ms. Salaam and Yusef's aunt Fern are taken to a back room on the first floor. There we waited and waited in what seemed like hours to see Yusef with ADA Linda Fairstein. Over and over I told her Yusef was 15. I didn't give them permission to talk to him. It fell on deaf ears as she replied, no one is talking to him.

Construction is going on here. I'm just waiting for a room where you can meet. Every now and then one member of the group would come in and show Fairstein a pad and talk to her in whispers too low for us to hear. Fairstein seems to give instructions to the team. After they talked back and forth they would leave and soon others would come participating in the same ritual. I told ADA Fairstein over and over again I did not give them consent to speak to Yusef and I wanted him to have a lawyer. Unknown to me ADA Linda Fairstein lied to me about them not questioning Yusef. Yusef was being interrogated as I sat in that backroom hostage to my thoughts and watched ADA Fairstein whispering to her team as I watched. I didn't see Korey anywhere at the precinct. Could he be in the building somewhere like Yusef? Was he with Yusef? Maybe he went home? Where was he? Did Yusef know I was there? Yusef Salaam's mother Sharonne Salaam, Marilyn Hatcher, ADA David Nocenti and two others arrived at the police precinct. The fight for Yusef started right away. The group that showed up on Yusef's behalf. It was a very continuous time. As the night passed ADA Linda Fairstein moved to call Nocenti's boss the Brooklyn DA and have him fired.

Upon arrival Korey's status had changed from friend waiting to return home or witness to suspect. Korey was small in size. At 16 years old Korey was separated from the others, placed in the adult cells and treated like an adult. They started working on him right away. Like the others he didn't know what the police were talking about. Rape? What rape? Woman? What woman? I didn't see a woman. All this fell on deaf ears. The police banged on the desk, yelled and screamed at him. Droplets from their mouths flew into Korey's face. The police began feeding Korey bits and pieces of the found jogger's story. Yusef, in a cell not too far away, recognized Korey's voice, he heard Korey being beaten by the police. He heard Korey cry out in screams. Yusef sank down in fear, wondering if he was next. Korey who was confused and learning delayed began to understand what the police wanted him to say. He began repeating it, to the best of his ability, what the police had told him. When he made mistakes the police would hit him, yell at him or bang on the table. This was day three. No one had been offered food or drink. The police interrogation continued getting him and the others ready to sign and make video confessions. Since Korey was 16, NY law allows him to be treated as an adult. Korey's parents received no telephone call of his arrest or location. They waited for him to return home. The sun was up when I returned home. Ms. Salaam stopped to see if Korey had returned. Ms. Wise answered the door. After learning Korey was not there. I told her what had happened. The next time I saw her she was at the police precinct. Nowadays when you talk to him he tells you, "What you see is what you get". Korey Wise's father died of cancer leaving his mother Deloris Wise and his brothers alone. Deloris Wise was a pregnant working mother during Korey's trial. After his conviction she took a second job to ensure he had money to pay her rent while she provided for his commissary, visits and visited him on every visiting day the prison allowed. There were times she went to visit and the snow was so high that the bus turned back not letting the visitors off canceling the visit.