

U.S. death penalty system imperfect

By Todd Luck

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (NNPA) - Wake Forest University recently put a spotlight on the existence of the death penalty in an imperfect justice system.

Among the panelists on November 15 was Darryl Hunt, who was exonerated of murder charges after spending 18 years in prison.

Since being released three years ago, he founded the Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice, which works to help others who may have been wrongfully convicted.

Hunt said innocent people

can be wrongly convicted — no matter who they are or the color of their skin. Hunt said he came very close to getting the death penalty in his own trial before the jury settled on life in prison.

"Nobody here is above what happened to me," said Hunt.

The panel also included Jennifer Cannino, the chair of the Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice.

Cannino talked about her own experience with wrongful conviction. In 1984, she was raped at knife point. She identified her rapist as Ronald Cotton, who was convicted of the crime. Years

after Cotton's conviction, DNA testing proved that he was innocent of the crime.

Cotton was released after 11 years in prison and cleared of all charges. Cannino said she didn't know what to do with the guilt she had about

it. For a while, friends convinced Cannino that she did not owe Cotton an apology. They would tell her Cotton, who had had run-ins with the law before his wrongful conviction, may have ended up with a longer and better life

in prison. "For a while that really worked, for about a second or two, until I realized no one wants to spend 11 years in prison in exchange for three meals a day for something they didn't do," said

Cannino. After PBS' "Frontline" featured Cotton's story on a 1997 episode, Cannino and Cotton finally met. Cotton held no grudge against her, and they became (See System, Page 15)

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