

# After 20 years in prison, DNA clears NY inmate

By Glenn Townes

Special to Sentinel-Voice

NEW YORK (NNPA) - The time was November 1985, and it was a particularly brutal, savage and heinous crime: a little boy and girl—both sexually assaulted, bludgeoned and slashed to death with scissors and a brick.

For an added sadistic and sick pleasure, the killer pounded nails into the skulls of the children and left their battered bodies in the basement of a seedy rooming house in Plainfield, N.J.

A man — the wrong man — was captured, confessed and was convicted of the crime. Last week, after more than 20 years in prison, he was freed.

Byron Halsey sat stoic, except for a single tear that trickled down his face last week, when he heard a Superior Court judge in an Elizabeth, N.J., courtroom overturn his conviction of the gruesome murders. The shocking reversal and subsequent release of the 46-year-old man after spending more than two decades incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit is indeed clear proof of the power of forensics — most notably DNA.

"Today, we can say with scientific certainty that Byron Halsey is innocent," said Vanessa Potkin, an attorney for the Innocence Project, a New York-based organization devoted to freeing wrongly convicted criminals. "It has taken more than two decades, but DNA has finally revealed the truth in this case."

At the time of the crime, Halsey was a 24-year-old factory worker with a spotty criminal record. He was mentally challenged and had never finished high school. He lived in a modest rooming house in a crime-ridden and seedy section of

Plainfield, N.J. Halsey resided in the same rooming house as the two victims — 8-year-old Tyrone Urquhart and his 7-year-old sister, Tina. He became a suspect after he failed a lie detector test, and semen at the scene of the crime was similar to his blood type.

Halsey was questioned aggressively and relentlessly by detectives on the case who were under intense pressure by the community to find the killer.

Halsey eventually acquiesced, yielding to the intense strain, confusing dialogue and supposed mounting circumstantial evidence, and, reluctantly, he confessed to the murders. He was sentenced to two life terms plus 20 years in prison, with no possibility of parole for 70 years. He spent nearly 22 years — the bulk of it in solitary confinement — at a New Jersey state prison.

The Innocence Project took the Halsey case in 2004 due to serious questions that remained unanswered and came to light years after the crime. For example, sophisticated and advanced DNA testing performed on stored semen and blood samples from the crime now matched the blood type of a former neighbor and witness for the prosecution, Clifton Hall.

Hall, 49, is already in prison for raping two women in the early 1990s. He was also a neighbor of the two victims and had a lengthy rap sheet. Halsey and Hall even slightly resembled each other.

The genetic profile includes crucial evidence that was implicated at Halsey's trial in the late '80s when sophisticated DNA analysis was unavailable. The new findings include: —Semen on the little girl's underwear (which was stuffed into her mouth during the rape and

murder) came from someone with the same blood type as Halsey. New DNA testing now shows that the semen is a direct match of Clifton Hall.

—Semen at the crime scene was matched to Halsey's blood type, but is a direct match to that of Clifton Hall.

—A cigarette butt found at the crime scene matched a brand that Clifton Hall was known to have smoked. DNA evidence also showed that it

belonged to Hall.

Another key point in the case was that Halsey, who only has a sixth-grade education and suffers from a severe learning disability, was essentially forced into confessing to the crime, according to Innocence Project attorneys.

Records show that detectives, in less than a 40-hour period, subjected him to more than 30 hours of intense and unyielding interrogation. Despite evidence at the time

that suggested that Clinton Hall was the perpetrator, detectives still relentlessly pursued Halsey. During his release to a media frenzy last week, Halsey hugged his mother and brother and thanked God for his release.

"I wasn't going to let nobody take my life from me," he said. "My grandmother told me that if you're innocent, fight them, and the truth will come out."

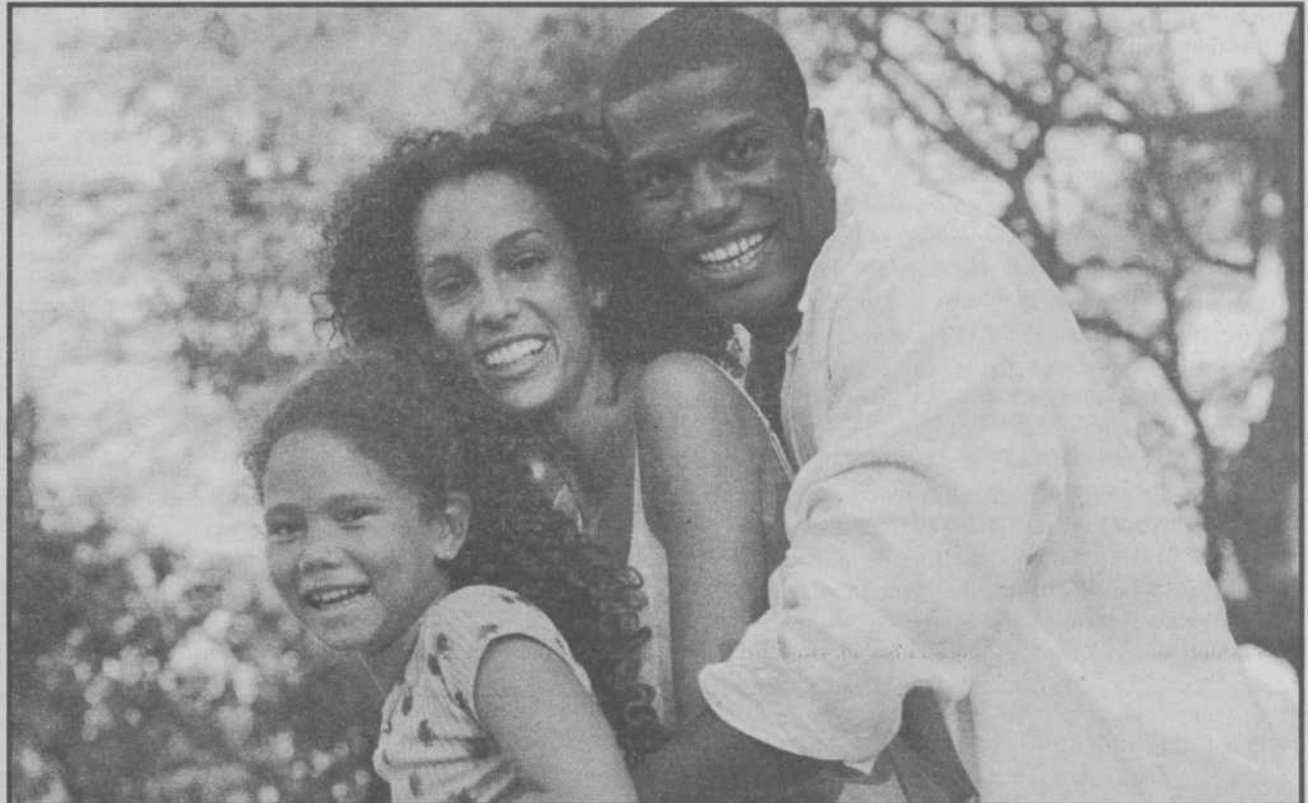
It finally has.

Halsey's trouble may not

be completely over, however. A final decision by the Union County prosecutor's office is expected in the coming weeks regarding if it will proceed with a retrial or drop the case and officially exonerate Halsey. A hearing on the matter has been scheduled for July 9.

During the interim, Halsey is required to wear an electronic monitoring device.

Glenn Townes writes for the New York Amsterdam News.



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Mosquitoes aren't just a nuisance; they can carry West Nile virus and other diseases.

Take these steps to reduce your risk:

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- Clean out mosquito breeding grounds on your property by draining standing water. Install or repair screens to prevent mosquitoes from getting inside your home.
- Report dead birds, stagnant swimming pools and mosquito problems to the health district online or by calling 759-1220.

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## Obama

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Edwards spokesman Mark Kornblau said Edwards' plan, estimated at a total cost of between \$90 billion and \$120 billion annually, is "truly universal."

"He believes that incremental measures are not enough," Kornblau said. "Any plan that does not cover all Americans is simply inadequate."

Clinton has yet to provide specifics of her healthcare plan. Clinton policy director Neera Tanden issued a statement commending Obama for entering the healthcare debate that she has long been fighting and saying that Clinton supports "true universal healthcare."

In a CNN-Opinion Research poll conducted earlier this month, about two-thirds said the government should provide national health insurance for all Americans, even if it would mean higher taxes.