

Dallas man exonerated after 27 years in prison

By Janeane Anderson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA) - When Charles Allen Chatman was arrested in 1981 for the sexual assault of a White female neighbor, he says he never thought he would be prosecuted, convicted and locked up for 27 years for a crime he didn't commit.

Day after day, he says he sat in his prison cell, waiting

for the opportunity to prove his innocence. "I didn't know anything else to do. I couldn't give up," Chatman said. "I wanted to prove to my family that I was innocent."

Now, thanks to DNA testing and vigilant advocacy from the Innocence Project of Texas, Dallas County District Attorney Craig Watkins and Judge John Creuzot, Chatman is a free man.

"You're an example of

how eventually justice does work," said Watkins, extending a heartfelt handshake as he apologized for Chatman's ordeal.

Chatman is the 15th person known to be a wrongfully convicted citizen in Dallas County, serving the longest amount of undeserved prison time. However, Chatman is only the second person to be cleared of a crime by post-conviction

DNA evidence based on testing initiated after Watkins took office one year ago.

In 2001, Chatman requested post-conviction DNA testing; however, in 2004, he elected to suspend testing on the small amount of biological sample left until technology had improved to produce a more definitive result. In January 2007, Creuzot ordered testing on the microscopic bit of tissue remaining at Orchid Cellmark Private Lab. The results excluding Chatman as the perpetrator were received one day prior to his exoneration hearing.

Chatman says the reason for his conviction was plain and simple: he is a Black man accused of raping a White woman.

Chatman had been eligible for parole three times during his prison sentence but had been denied each time because he refused to admit he committed the crime for which he was convicted.

"I don't know if they thought I was trying to be rebellious or what, but I never would, I never will ad-

mit to the crime," Chatman said.

Attorney Jeff Blackburn of the Innocence Project, who served as legal counsel during Chatman's exoneration process, says Chatman's case is proof that there is a tragic lack of real defense given to poor people.

"The problem with Charles' case is that it is not that remarkable," he said.

Blackburn says an unjust pattern has developed in the U.S. legal system that leads to numerous erroneous convictions. He says young Black men with prior criminal records who are accused of rape and have little or no money for a proper defense are quickly convicted by largely White juries.

Chatman agrees. He says he is one of hundreds of people who sit in prisons and penitentiaries across the state and nation who are wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit.

"I know of two or three people personally who would be sitting where I am if they had the support I had," Chatman said.

Although Chatman spent

almost three decades falsely imprisoned, he says he doesn't hold any malice in his heart for the woman who accused him of rape.

"I am a Christian, and my Bible teaches me forgiveness," Chatman said. "That doesn't mean I don't want to bring recognition to what happened. This is something that needs to be stopped. There are too many people in the penitentiary that don't need to be there."

Chatman says he was just a 20-year-old kid working here and there for his relatives' janitorial company when he was accused, prosecuted and wrongfully convicted of rape.

Twenty-seven years later, he describes himself as a child of God who wants to do God's will. Chatman also says he wants to serve as a support system for other wrongfully convicted inmates.

And while he absorbs the reality of his freedom, he says he will spend time with family and friends, eating home cooked meals.

Janeane Anderson writes for the Dallas Weekly.

Coroner: Singer Ike Turner died from cocaine, disease

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Controversial rock and roll pioneer Ike Turner, who passed away last month, died of an apparent cocaine overdose, according to a report filed by the San Diego County coroner's office.

Turner had a long, well-known history of drug problems.

"The cause of death for Mr. Turner is cocaine toxicity with other significant additions contributing," Paul Parker, the chief investigator at the medical examiner's office, said in a statement early Wednesday. Those other factors included hypertensive cardiovascular disease and pulmonary emphysema.

Parker concluded that Turner's death would be ruled accidental, although an

official announcement has not been made.

Though Turner was a famed musician and record producer, he was best known for his rocky relationship with Tina Turner and the claims of spousal abuse that she brought against him. During the 1980s, Turner was convicted of drug-related charges, and he was later sentenced to serve several years in a California state prison.

In recent years, Turner sought to ensure his legacy in a brighter light. He won his first Grammy Award in 2007 for Best Traditional Blues Album thanks to his "Risin'" with the Blues LP. And in a 2000 appearance on VH1's "Behind the Music," Turner seemed to recognize his need to come to terms with his past

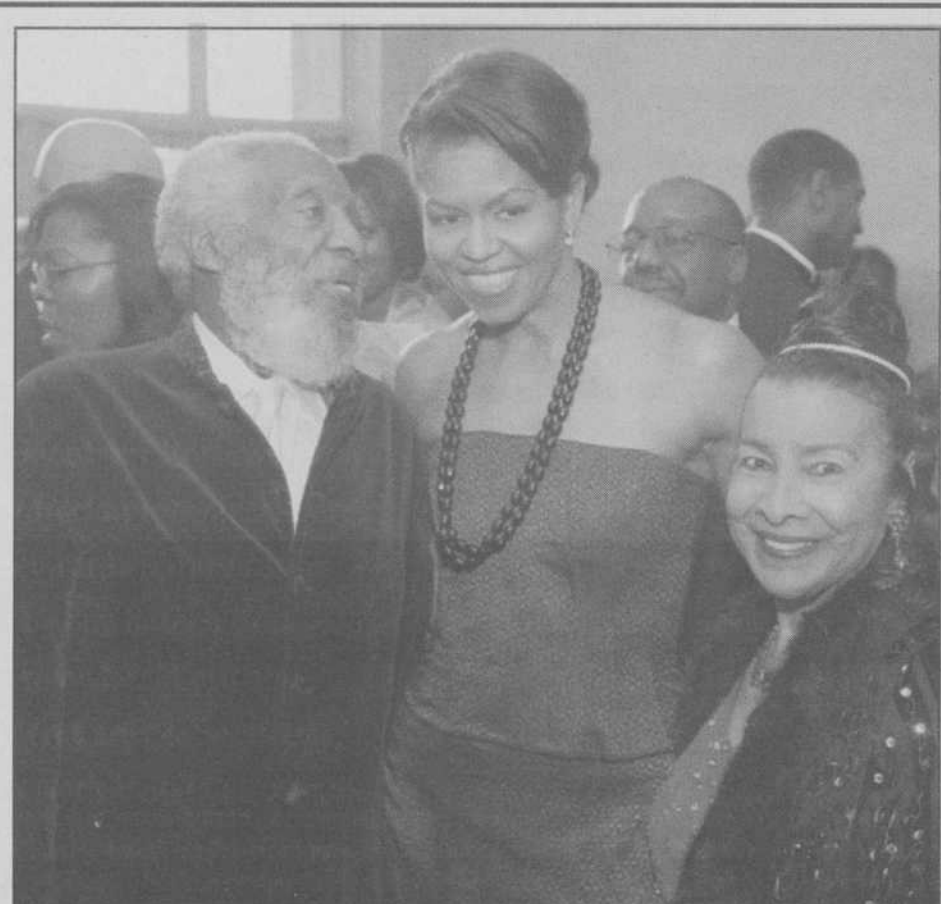
tribulations.

"I went back over my complete life, man, and I see the things that I did that was good and I see things that I've done that was wrong," he said. "I don't wanna be remembered as the demon they made me [in the media]. ...People that know me, what they really know I am, that's what I want to be remembered for."

Funeral and memorial service were held in late December for Turner in Gardena, California, south of Los Angeles.

Phil Spector and Little Richard were among those who eulogized the late rock and roll pioneer, with Richard calling Turner "one of the greatest musicians I have ever met in my life."

Turner was 76 years old.



TRUMPETING LEADERS

Sentinel-Voice photo by Marty Frierson

Xernona Clayton, creator of the Trumpet Awards, shares time with Michelle Obama, center, and activist Dick Gregory at the 16th annual awards show, held at the Omni Hotel in Atlanta on Sunday. Obama is married to Illinois Sen. Barack Obama.

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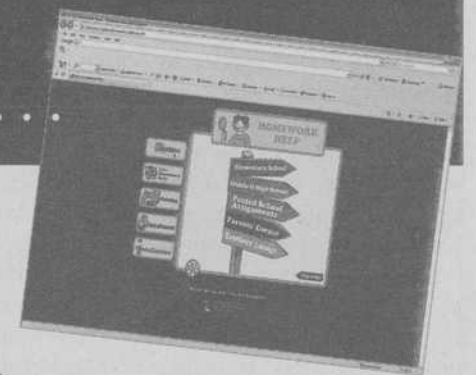
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