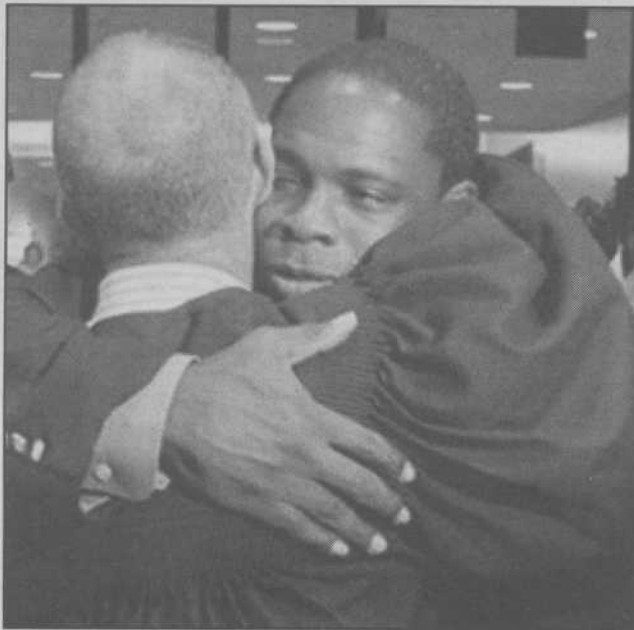


Innocence Project working to right wrongs

By Gordon Jackson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA) - The recent release of James Lee Woodard, the 17th man to be exonerated in Dallas County, made abundantly clear the fact that the criminal justice system is in need of a major overhaul. But those changes must begin in the hearts and minds first before justice can become a reality in the legal system in America, and especially in Dallas.

"The American public has got to buy into those issues, it's got to be leadership that comes from the group up and



Charles Chatman

the top down," said Morris Dees, co-founder and Chief Counsel of the Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Alabama.

Dees, assembled with a "Dream Team" of criminal justice reform, gave their inner thoughts about what needs to be done right, to an audience that included at least six victims who suffered severe wrongs. He was joined by District Attorney Craig Watkins, District Criminal Judge John Creuzot

and Jeff Blackburn, founder and director of the Innocence Project of Texas at "Freedom and Justice in America: A Live Conversation Onstage," a fundraising forum for IPOT, held May 1 at the Angelika Theater.

Listening intently within the two front rows, Charles Chatman, James Giles, Thomas McGowan, Billy James Smith, James Waller and James Lee Woodard sat, having served a total of 116 years in prison for crimes they did



James Waller

not commit, thanks to IPOT using DNA evidence to prove their innocence.

"Here I am right here. I'm taking it all in but it feels good," said McGowan.

He was just two weeks removed from 23 years of bondage, cleared in a Dallas County court of sexual abuse and burglary charges. Dallas County has had more exonerees than any county in the country. Texas leads all states with 33. McGowan amazingly said he's not bitter.

"I said to myself that God forgives," he said. "To me, it's like getting reborn, getting a second chance at life.

I don't have time to be bitter, I'm trying to leave that behind."

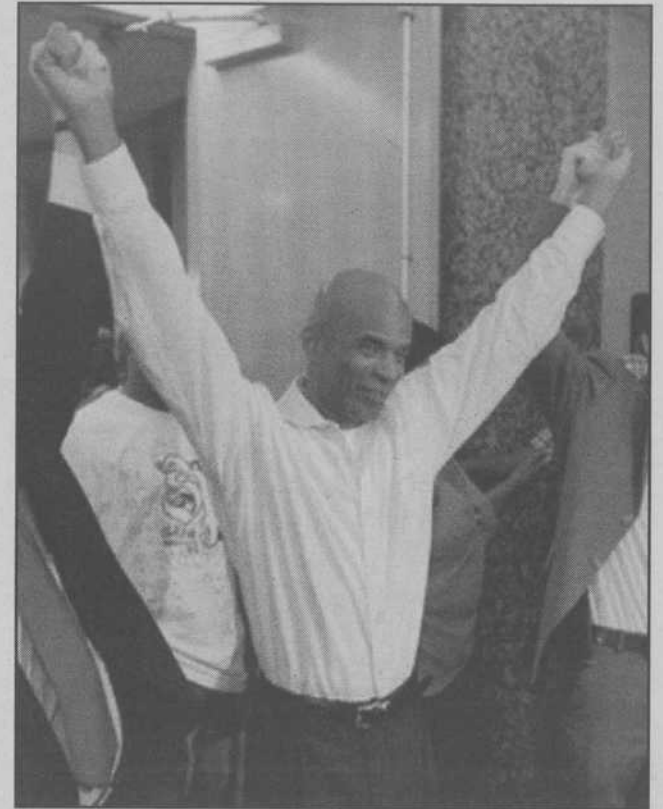
The long string of clearings has caused Dallas County to be eyed as a model for justice reform, also partly because of Watkins' open policy to review all past felony cases and Judge

Creuzot's successful drug rehabilitation record.

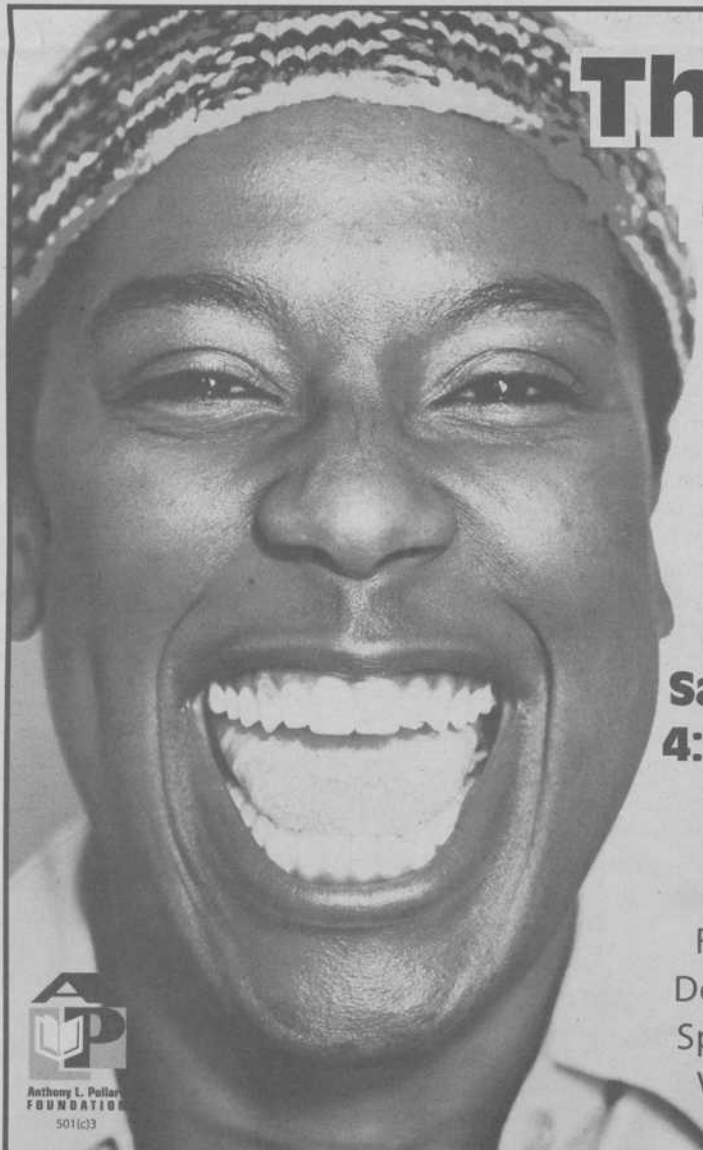
"We're trying to start a new civil rights movement," said Watkins, the first Black district attorney in the history of Texas. With most recorded false convictions taking place in the 1970s and '80s, in the (See Justice, Page 11)



Billy James Smith



Thomas McGowan



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