

NAACP, others hail plea from Georgia prisoner

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) — As much of America prepared to celebrate the election of its first Black president and began anticipating Thanksgiving feasts with family, a dubious anniversary passed quietly inside the Lee State prison in Leesburg, Ga.

That was Nov. 3, 2008, the 17th anniversary of the day that William Jonathan Mayo was arrested and charged with armed robbery — only three credits shy of graduation from Morehouse College.

Then a U.S. Army ROTC scholarship recipient preparing to serve four years as a second lieutenant after his pending May 1992 graduation, Mayo now prepares to spend his 17th Thanksgiving and holiday season behind bars. His is an unfathomable story of questionable justice that has gained the growing attention of the National NAACP and rights leaders around the country.

"Even if you are a skeptic, you have to admit that even if William committed those crimes, he should be out of jail by now. You have to admit that two life sentences are a bit much for a robbery where no one was hurt, nothing of substance was taken and those who did the crime were captured right away," said Jim Clingman, an author, NNPA columnist and former editor of the *Cincinnati Herald*. "This is a man who was three credits short of graduating from Morehouse College; he was a scholarship recipient; and he was a mentor for other

young Black men."

The William Mayo story begins with a noble deed as he reached out to two youth from the streets of Chicago, where he had worked as an undercover store detective in Carson Pirie Scott, a popular department store.

According to interviews with those close to the case and a case history posted on FreeMayo.com, the chain of events are as follows:

On Nov. 3, 1991, William Mayo picked up two street-prone Chicago teens, Tyrone Wilson and Dale Thomas, whom he was mentoring. He drove them to Morehouse just to show them the college campus and a possible new way of life. Having first seen them in a gym, Mayo thought both teens — over six feet tall — might be able to get basketball scholarships. But, unbeknownst to Mayo, both Wilson and Thomas were drug dependent and were looking for a fix. They seized an opportunity shortly after 7 p.m. when Mayo parked the car and went into the home of a friend in Smyrna, Ga. to pick up some clothing he had left there.

After Mayo exited the car and darted inside one of the row houses, the two teens, intending to rob both Mayo and the occupant of the home, ventured into the darkness, entering another house by mistake. There, they robbed a husband and wife at gunpoint. They took a small briefcase and some jewelry. The couple had no money. The teens tied the couple's hands behind their backs and fled. The husband then made it to a neighbor's house in



William J. Mayo on his way to trial the day of his conviction.

order to summon police.

When the apparently unsuspecting Mayo emerged from the home of his friend, Wilson and Thomas were on their way back to the car in the dark and got in. The three pulled off, headed back to Chicago.

About 10 minutes later they were pulled over by a police officer who found a gun that had been pushed under the driver's seat; the smaller items in the pockets of Wilson and Thomas; and the briefcase in the back seat with Wilson.

Under pressure from the police who threatened more jail time unless they cooperated — the two teens turned against Mayo, ultimately becoming state's witnesses, accusing him of being the mastermind for the robbery.

On April, 3, 1992, the teens, both 18 or 19 when the crimes were committed, pled

guilty to armed robbery. They received 20-year sentences — far less than they could have received — for testifying that Mayo was the mastermind of the crime. Both Wilson and Thomas are now free.

Mayo was charged with two counts of armed robbery, two counts of aggravated assault and one count of burglary. Represented by state appointed attorney Frank Guy Smith (now deceased), Mayo was found guilty of all counts after only 45 minutes of deliberations. The jurors included 11 Whites and one Black.

Judge Robert E. Flournoy, Jr. (also now deceased) immediately sentenced Mayo to two life sentences for the armed robbery charges; two 20-year sentences for the aggravated assault charges; and 20 years of probation for the burglary charge. All of

Mayo's appeals have been denied, including two motions for a new trial.

But, then came a break in the case. At a motion for a new trial on Sept. 1993, Wilson and Thomas came forward in court for the first time, testifying that Mayo had no involvement or knowledge of the crime they committed and was innocent of the crime of which he had been convicted. Judge Robert E. Flournoy, Jr. — the same Judge who oversaw the original 1992 trial — denied the motion.

At another motion in December 1995, Wilson and Thomas testified for a second time that Mayo had no knowledge or involvement in the crime and openly apologized to Mayo and his family for the pain that had been caused.

Seventeen years later, Mayo has been housed in at least 18 different prisons since the conviction. A Cincinnati native, with no prior criminal record, Mayo prepares to spend yet another holiday season in the custody of the Georgia Department of Corrections for the crime that the two young men have confessed.

"It's destroyed my life and my career," he says in a brief interview with the NNPA News Service. "They just expect me to lay down as an African-American male and not say anything. [It's like] I'm Black, I'm educated and I stand up for my rights, so [they say], 'we're going to show you just how much rights you have.'"

Mayo's detailed scenario, commemorated in an audio tape titled, "Three Credits Shy", has become one of America's incredible stories of questionable justice. Like the case of death row inmate Troy Davis, recently denied for a hearing by the U.S. Supreme Court, the key stumbling block in the Mayo case are laws that deny the use of after-discovered evidence or belated witnesses in order to prove innocence.

"All people should be concerned when young men like Troy Davis and William Jonathan Mayo are convicted of crimes based on the testimony of witnesses who later changed their stories," said Benjamin Todd Jealous, president and CEO of the NAACP. "The NAACP and its units are committed to seeing that all evidence which might clear a defendant of criminal charges is

brought to light. The integrity of our criminal justice system demands it."

An NAACP resolution passed last summer on behalf of Mayo, not only advocated for his release, but for a new law providing for an immediate new trial when witnesses recant testimonies.

Meanwhile, as he watches and empathizes with the case of Troy Davis, Mayo awaits his own fate.

"The guys in my case signed an affidavit saying they were coerced by the Cobb county police department to testify the way they wanted them to testify or they would get more time," Mayo recalls. "They concealed the fact that they had criminal histories... while they have shipped me into the most dangerous prisons in the state of Georgia and stacked me with some of the worst disciplinary procedures."

As his case attracts growing media attention, Mayo finds himself in a catch-22.

"Any inmate who draws a lot of attention to the system, he potentially can expose what's happening on the inside," he said.

He says the more attention his case gets, the worse the system can make it for him behind bars.

For example, in late October, Mayo was strongly penalized for an alleged mailing infraction involving a set of broken headphones and a faulty CD player that he was trying to return to the manufacturer for repairs.

He received 120 days of mail restriction, 60 days with no telephone calls and 60 days with no rights to purchase from the prison store.

Kimberly Todd, a childhood friend, former church mate from Cincinnati and president of the WJM Innocence Coalition says the penalties exacerbate his pain.

"Because the mail is their connection to the outside world, it's a big deal with the mail call, it means somebody outside is thinking about you," Todd said. "He's so involved with his case. It's going to be difficult for him to get through the holidays with no contact."

Despite what he now suffers, Mayo says nothing is worse than "being convicted of a crime that I didn't commit."

He pleads, "I need help... They want me to be a slave to them. Be a slave to this mentality, be a slave to this injustice."

University sorry for racist policies

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Bob Jones University has apologized for racist policies including a one-time ban on interracial dating that wasn't lifted until nine years ago and its unwillingness to admit Black students until 1971.

The private fundamentalist Christian school that was founded in 1927 said its rules on race were shaped by culture instead of the Bible, according to a statement posted on the university's website.

The university in northwestern South Carolina, with about 5,000 students, didn't begin admitting Black students until nearly

20 years after the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling found public segregated schools were unconstitutional.

"We failed to accurately represent the Lord and to fulfill the commandment to love others as ourselves. For these failures we are profoundly sorry. Though no known antagonism toward minorities or expressions of racism on a personal level have ever been tolerated on our campus, we allowed institutional policies to remain in place that were racially hurtful," the statement said.

The interracial dating ban was lifted in March 2000, not

long after the policy became an issue in the Republican presidential primary that year. Then-candidate George W. Bush was criticized when he spoke at the school during one of his first campaign stops in the state after losing in New Hampshire.

Bob Jones University President Stephen Jones decided to issue the apology because the school still receives questions about its views on race.

The leader of the South Carolina NAACP said the civil rights group welcomed the statement.

"It's unfortunate it took them this long — particularly a religious, faith-based insti-

tution — to realize that we all are human beings and the rights of all people should be respected and honored," said Lonnie Randolph, president of the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Randolph said that when Jones became president three years ago, he asked the civil rights leader not to hold the decisions made under his father and grandfather against him.

Jones is the great-grandson of the school founder, Bob Jones. He took over for his father, also named Bob Jones, in 2005.