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Dallas County Exoneree Addresses Students

FORT WORTH, Texas – At age 47, Charles Chatman says he is still adjusting to modern-day conveniences like debit cards and cell phones. Having been convicted in 1981 for a sexual assault crime he did not commit, Chatman spent 27 years in jail, and was only released in January 2008.

Chatman was the guest speaker at the Wesleyan Innocence Project's annual Exoneree Luncheon on Wednesday, April 2. Speaking to over 80 students and law school community members, Chatman shared his story of wrongful conviction and how his innocence was proven through DNA testing and the work of the Innocence Project of Texas and other individuals.

"In 2002 I was blessed with the knowledge of DNA testing," Chatman said. "At that time, I didn't have a lot of confidence in the legal system or attorneys."

Chatman said that his main sources of information while he was in jail were television and newspapers. In fact, he learned that DNA testing was being used to prove the innocence of wrongfully convicted inmates through a television newscast. He worked to make contact with someone who could help him, and after a judge took on his case, things began to move in the right direction. After many years of work, Chatman was exonerated on Jan. 3, 2008.

Saying he "took a chance" on DNA testing, Chatman calls himself a product of the efforts of the Innocence Project and the other individuals who work to help people in situations like his.

Chatman's presentation occurred one day after Dallas County Commissioners voted to continue funding District Attorney Craig Watkins' '94 Conviction Integrity Unit, a team of four people who work in conjunction with the Innocence Project of Texas to review the hundreds of cases of jailed inmates requesting DNA testing.

Since 2001, 15 wrongfully convicted inmates have been exonerated in Dallas County through DNA testing, the highest number of county exonerations in the country.

To learn more about the Innocence Project of Texas, visit www.innocenceprojectoftexas.org.

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