

DNA test frees man who served 30 years

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John White confesses he's no angel, and admits that he committed the robbery and drug offenses that earned him prison sentences of 7 and 2 years in the 1990s.



Ga. Dept. of Corrections

John White

But the Meriwether County man always said he was innocent in the 1979 rape of a 74-year-old Manchester woman. White, who was convicted of the rape and sentenced to life in prison, was released from the Macon State Prison in Oglethorpe Monday night after new DNA tests ruled him out as the rapist. He spent his first night out riding around in the car with his wife of 14 years. "I enjoyed myself. I didn't get no sleep, though," he said Tuesday.

White was arrested six weeks after the August 11, 1979 rape, and the victim, who had also been beaten and robbed, picked him out of a photo line-up. She later picked White, then 20, out of a live line-up, and he was found guilty the following May of rape, aggravated assault, burglary and robbery and sentenced to life in prison plus 40 years. He served about 10 years of that sentence before he was paroled in 1990.

But White was convicted three years later with marijuana and cocaine possession and spent another 2 years in prison. Then, after two years of freedom, White was convicted in 1997 of robbery and sentenced to 7 years. But more importantly, White's parole was revoked, reinstating the original sentence of life in prison for the rape he adamantly claimed from the beginning that he didn't commit.

White said that having originally been sent to prison at age 20, "I was raised on the chain gang, and I didn't know how to make my life once I got out."

In 2004, White wrote a letter asking for help from the Georgia Innocence Project (GIP), a non-profit organization started in 2002 that uses DNA testing to free those wrongly convicted of crimes. The GIP took on the case, and discovered earlier this year that while a piece of human flesh found at the crime scene had been destroyed, hairs collected and linked to White through microscopic analysis were still on file at the Meriwether County Superior Court Clerk's office.

In early November the evidence was sent to the GBI Crime Lab for DNA testing. Thursday the lab determined that the hair did not come from White, but from another person already in the DNA database. That man is now being investigated for raping the woman, who is deceased.

White recalled at a news conference Tuesday his reaction several months ago when he was told that the hair from the crime scene had been found.

"I knew right then that it was all over. Through the grace of God, there was still some left for them to check." White's wife, Mary, his mother and three of his six sisters went to the prison Monday night to pick him up. "It felt good, like something had been lifted off my shoulders," he said of his first taste of freedom since he was returned to prison 10 years ago.

The soft-spoken White, speaking Tuesday through what his wife called "tears of joy," said, "I used to wonder, why did this happen to me?"

White admitted that he hasn't always lived a "model life," but said he has "no fear" of his future behavior resulting in another arrest.

"I'll try the best I can to rebuild my life," he said. "The first thing I'd like to do is embrace God a little bit better."