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From: [Doug Tjapkes](#)

Sent: Thursday, July 05, 2007 7:05 AM

Subject: Our condolences to the family

INNOCENT assisted the University of Wisconsin Innocence Project on this case. I traveled to Wisconsin, and visited Mr. Zimmerman in prison. Our sympathy to all members of his family. Doug

Man wrongly accused of murder fails to get 'storybook' ending

By Dan Springer/La Crosse Tribune

Evan Zimmerman deserved so much more.

After spending 3 1/2 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Zimmerman should have earned the chance to become a very, very old man with lots of time to spend with his children and grandchildren.

But such "Hollywood endings" are rare.

And Zimmerman, who eventually was cleared in the 2000 slaying of his former girlfriend, died Saturday after being left partially disabled, financially strapped and, since December, battling cancer in the wake of his legal ordeal.

His troubles had started shortly after Kathleen Thompson's body was found on an Eau Claire street in early 2000. Investigators with the Eau Claire Police Department called Zimmerman their top suspect.

A year later, he was arrested, charged, convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

That conviction was tossed out, and Zimmerman was granted a new trial in January 2004 after the Wisconsin Innocence Project proved he received ineffective counsel in his first trial.

Shortly after La Crosse attorney Keith Belzer joined the defense team, Zimmerman's bond was reduced and he was allowed to move into a modest apartment on La Crosse's South Side.

Although he was offered the chance to stay out of prison by pleading guilty to lesser charges just before the second trial was to start, Zimmerman refused, Belzer said.

"He wasn't going to ruin his name or the name of his children by taking the easy way out," Belzer said. "He wanted people to know he was innocent."

In the middle of that second trial, Eau Claire County District Attorney Ronald White

abruptly dropped all charges against Zimmerman on April 29, 2005.

Zimmerman returned to La Crosse to rebuild his life, but that proved difficult. He was partially disabled from a stroke he had in prison, and job opportunities were few for a man once convicted of murder.

Yet he was at peace and content to enjoy life, son Shannon Zimmerman said Monday.

“He had such an appreciation for the simple things in life,” his son said. “Time with your family, time to be outside, and the opportunity to experience all those things were important to him.”

Shortly after his second trial ended, Zimmerman met a woman who would become his closest friend and then caretaker in the final months of his life.

Kay Simon had just lost her husband when she met Zimmerman, who lived in the same building, by chance.

“He helped me through my problems, and I helped him through his struggles,” Simon said. “I said many times (God) put us together for a reason.”

The two enjoyed taking trips to Goose Island in Simon’s 1963 Thunderbird to share nature and talk.

Their discussions occasionally centered on his past problems, his future goals and larger topics, such as God and faith.

“He wasn’t a big church-goer, but he was very Christian,” Simon said. “He trusted his Lord and knew where he was going.”

Zimmerman spent much of his final days concentrating on redemption and forgiveness, Shannon Zimmerman said.

“If he had any bitterness, it was maybe toward the detectives in Eau Claire, because the minute it started they never let off him,” his son said. “Most of all, he was happy he had the chance to prove the legal system corrects itself.”

The illegal and immoral taking of your freedom is, as far as I am concerned, the worst possible wrong that a free society can commit against one of its citizens. PAUL J. CIOLINO