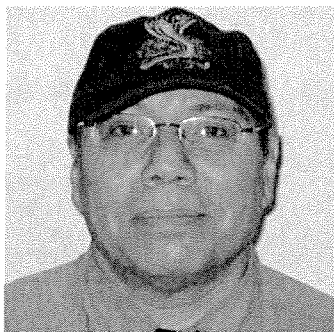


# special report



By Al Tobin

## Falsely Accused Investigator Rises from Adversity Aims For Law School

At 17, Jarrett Adams was no different than most teenage boys. He listened to Tupac, Biggie, hung out with the guys, cheered as Michael Jordan led the Chicago Bulls to their second three-peat of the 1990s.

Other than a little mischief he was a pretty good kid. His mother, Lois, kept him pretty much reeled-in. Lois worked hard doing bookkeeping and accounting. She often worked two jobs. She raised Adams and his brother by herself.

A graduate of Hillcrest High School outside of Chicago, Adams' seemed headed for happy days. He had the freshness of youth. The last thing he, or his mother expected when he went to the University of Wisconsin campus in Whitewater to party on September 5, 1998, was that he would end up in prison for a sexual assault he did not commit.

Adams spent eight years in prison until a federal appeals court overturned his conviction in 2006 for ineffective assistance of counsel. He's been working for a year and a half as an investigator with the Chicago Federal Defender Program. Now he plans to go to law school. He wants to get his law degree so he can prevent others from being wrongfully convicted.

"I plan to go to the best law school so I can be the best for those who need the most," Adams said.

From the moment Adams went to prison, he went to work on his case. At Dodge Correctional Institution in Waupun, Wisconsin,



Adams earned the respect of fellow inmates. He had a thirst for knowledge.

He helped inmates file written responses when they were cited for prison-rule infractions.

"I started being an advocate for them. So many couldn't read, couldn't write," Adams said. "I'd helped guys with beating conduct reports when they got written up, all kinds of things."

He spent as much time as he could in the prison law library. When Adams couldn't find something, when pages were missing from law books, he wrote to defense lawyers, even if he didn't know them. They often sent him the copies he needed.

## Falsely Accused Investigator Rises from Adversity Aims For Law School. continued

"I was able to help other inmates and it helped me to sharpen my skills to file my brief on my own. Keep in mind that when I started I had no understanding of the intricacies of the legal field," he said.

He became so good at it that he started to irk prison officials. A confidential informant sensing that he might be able to do himself some good, made up a story.

"A confidential informant said I was a leader of a gang, and that I was trying to incite inmates to riot because of the institution's policies," Adams said. "Prison officials ran into my cell at three in the morning while I was sleeping. They put me in segregation."

Based on the CI's allegations, Wisconsin prison officials transferred Adams to "a gulag," the supermax prison at Boscobel, Wisconsin. It was a tough place to do time.

"The shower was in your room. The only time you were allowed outside your room was two hours a week."

Adams protested. He challenged the transfer and the CI's accusations. He filed a writ of certiorari. The Dane County courts ordered prison officials to release Adams back into the general prison population on the basis that he was being held in segregation on unreliable evidence.

"The informant was lying, and the court knew it," he said. "When the allegations surfaced, I was working as a server in the prison kitchen. The courts also ordered that they give me back pay for wages lost. I was only making 30 cents an hour, so I didn't receive much. However, I luckily used that money to buy stamps and write to the Innocence Project, which ultimately was responsible for getting my conviction reversed."

Through the terrific work of the Wisconsin Innocence Project—a University of Wisconsin Law School program—Adams' wrongful conviction was overturned.

Attorney Keith Findley, of the Wisconsin Innocence Project, said Adams was anything but a passive victim of the legal process.

"He actively and effectively participated in constructing his defense, and he did it well. Often times, working with Jarrett was more like working with a colleague than a client."

Almost every inmate knows the facts of his case. But few grasp the legal nuances the way Adams did. The Innocence Project focused attention on the ineffectiveness of the attorney who handled his trial. And, ultimately, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals overturned his conviction.

It is daunting to think how Adams' life may have turned out, had he lost his appeal and been forced to serve all 28 years of his original sentence.

"When you're in prison, the appeals, the waiting for court decisions, eats up huge chunks of your time," he said.

Imagine being imprisoned eight years for something you didn't do, and then find that it's going to haunt you when you try to get a job.

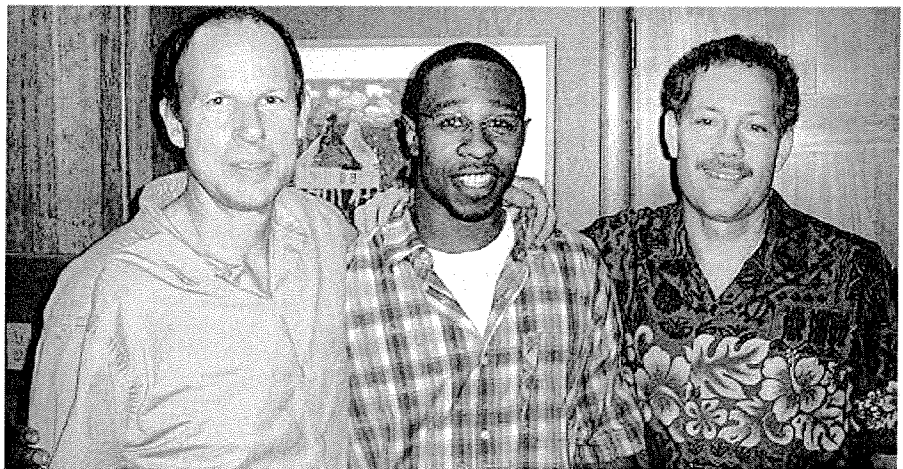
### Hard Times After Prison

Once he got out of prison, Adams went to live in Chicago with his mother. He took whatever kind of job he could get. This was not someone shy about work. He did yard work, shoveled snow, poured cement, did masonry. He did whatever was available.

But like most of us, he needed a job that was steady, a job with health insurance and benefits. He took a class on public speaking. He polished his interviews skills and set out to find his niche. He took a test to work for Comcast, the cable TV company in Chicago.

He did well on the test. Got an interview. By the end of the interview, he had won over the woman from human resources. She said he was the kind of guy she would let baby-sit her kids. Then came the letter from Comcast saying the position had gone to someone more qualified. Adams wasn't buying the explanation.

"It was like a Pandora's box opened and said where the hell were you for 10 years," Adams recalled. "I was thinking I can't even go and install cable and work my way



Jarrett Adams (center) at age 27 posing for a photo with attorneys Keith Findley (right) and John Pray (left). Findley and Pray are with the Wisconsin Innocence Project. They played a key role in winning Adams' appeal.

## Falsely Accused Investigator Rises from Adversity Aims For Law School, continued

through college because of my background. This is crazy.”

As it does for most ex-prisoners, even those whose convictions have been overturned, the gap in his job resume held him back.

“They get you into the system at the snap of a finger and it takes the longest time to get you out. And once you get out, it takes a long time to get your record wiped clean.” Adams spent months trying to wipe away the grime.

“I had to get all kinds of certified documents and send them into the FBI (which runs NCIC) to clear what they had about me off the data base.”

One word comes to mind these days when one hears Adams talk. Urgency. The years he spent behind bars is giving Adams the grit and determination he now has.

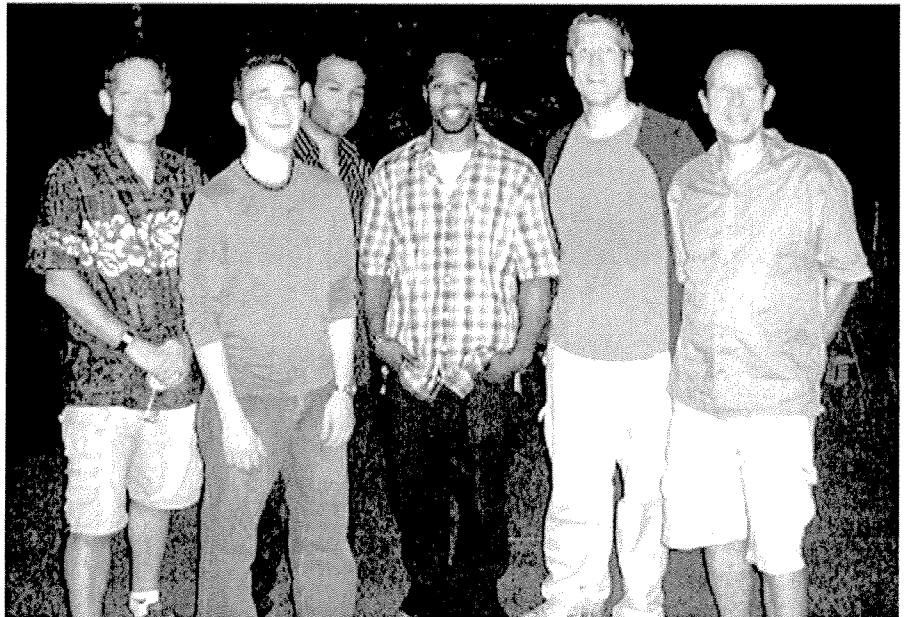
“Psychologically I’m chasing 10 years I know I’m not going to get back.”

Adams will earn his bachelor’s degree in criminal justice from Roosevelt University in the spring of next year. Adams then plans to attend law school next fall. And after that he wants to come back as a criminal defense attorney to work with people who can’t afford a lawyer.

### Growing Up On The South Side

Adams was born in Chicago. He grew up in the community of Burnside. The phenomenon of white flight had taken place. He went through adolescence as the once proud working class neighborhood struggled with skyrocketing crime rates, gang violence and urban decay. The murder rate on the south side particularly during 1991 and 1992 was high.

Adams lived for a spell in South Shore, Chicago. His environs were a whole world away from neighborhood notables Kanye West



*Jarrett Adams (center) celebrating his successful appeal after his release from prison in 2007. The appeal was successfully litigated by attorneys Keith Findley (far left) and John Pray (far right). Also joining in the celebration are students from the University of Wisconsin Law School, who also worked on the case.*

and First Lady Michelle Obama. His world was the turbulent side of Chicago.

“There were even cops who cruised around in unmarked cars with doors taken off, so when they jumped out and chased you, they didn’t have to take time to open the doors,” Adams said.

I remember sitting on the porch watching cops slam people up against the wall for just standing on the corner talking. There was a definite alienation between the community and the police. It was us against them.”

It was no wonder that when it came time for Adams to go to high school his mother had him move outside of Chicago to live with relatives.

Back in the day, Adams didn’t think much of public defenders. “Growing up, the view was public defenders are working with the police and you get what you pay for.”

Adams doesn’t feel that way anymore.

### Working For The Defender

“I’ve learned so much by just being around people who have all this experience and knowledge,” he said. “When I go to law school, a lot of it is going to be very familiar...statutes, federal codes, sentencing guidelines and how they work. It won’t be new to me.”

Adams recently got to help put together a mitigation video for a sentencing. The case involved a young woman who got sucked into a shady mortgage scheme.

“She was in an abusive relationship. She had two kids by this guy. In the name of love and out of fear, she did whatever he said. It was really sad.”

The video showed the mother interacting with her children, making dinner, getting them ready for school and other family activities. The staff attorney was able to use

## Falsely Accused Investigator Rises from Adversity Aims For Law School, continued

the video at sentencing to convince the judge to place her client on probation.

"I think public defenders get a bad rap," Adams said. "I now work with the Federal Defender Program in Chicago and the lawyers there are some of the best I have ever seen."

Carol A. Brook, executive director of the Federal Defender Program for the Northern District of Illinois, said her office had been talking for some time about the need to hire someone who had an understanding of prison life and who could become expert in prison rules and procedures.

Brook said that when she met Adams, it was like the Yiddish word *besbert*, the perfect person at the perfect time. He was obviously smart, hard working and most importantly, eager to learn.

"Ever since I got to work with Ben Rayborn, who moved from the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted" list to Alcatraz to the San Diego Federal Defender Office where he became its chief legal research associate (from 1971 to 2004), I have yearned to hire someone like Ben for our office—someone who lived through the pain of prison and came out wanting to use their skills to help others," Brook said.

I thought Jarrett could be that person. I'm happy to say, the Office of Defender Services supported the idea, and Jarrett has more than lived up to our expectations. He truly understands what our clients are going through and is always willing and wanting to go the extra mile to help us prepare the best possible defense for every single client."

Michael Medina, chief investigator for the Federal Defender in Chicago, described Adams as "a persistent individual who does not take no for an answer."

"Jarrett is eager to learn and takes on all assignments and does not hesitate to ask

The deficiency the Seventh Circuit referred to in its decision, was Adams' defense counsel's failure to call a critical witness that the lawyer knew about at the time of the trial; an impartial witness who would have blown apart the so-called victim's story.

questions," Medina said. "His experience in prison helps in communicating with our clients, and, if they have a problem, they confide in him. They trust him.

"Our program will miss Jarrett, but I think it is great that he is planning to go to law school, and I think he will get through law school and become a great lawyer."

Findley describes Adams as "remarkably bright and perceptive," someone who "has the kind of personality that you just can't say no to." And he certainly understands what makes a good lawyer from the client's perspective. Findley thinks Adams will make a terrific defense lawyer.

"Before Jarrett had received any legal training, he was able to master the law and the facts in his case and helped steer us to raise and argue what turned out to be the winning claim," Findley said.

### The Long Way Home

The long way home, dates to the year 2000. That was when an all-white jury in Jefferson County, Wisconsin, convicted Adams and a co-defendant of sexual assault. They were sentenced to 28 years in prison. A third man, was twice tried separately. His first trial

ended in a hung jury. His second trial ended in dismissal of the charges when the state failed to turn over exculpatory evidence.

The injustice echoed for years. On November 7, 2002, the Wisconsin State Court of Appeals affirmed Adams' conviction. It was a disappointing day, but not the end for him. Hope remained as he dreamed of a better life. Four long, cold Wisconsin winters passed.

Then on June 30, 2006, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, ruled.

"We reverse the district court's decision based on the constitutional deficiencies of his trial counsel."

Winter was gone. Spring had finally come in the life of Jarrett Adams.

But it wasn't until February 9, 2007, that the State of Wisconsin dropped the charges against Adams, and he was released.

The deficiency the Seventh Circuit referred to in its decision was Adams' defense counsel's failure to call a critical witness that the lawyer knew about at the time of the trial; an impartial witness who would have blown apart the so-called victim's story.

In retrospect, the piece of evidence that overturned the Adams case was a simple interview with a cooperative witness, willing to be subpoenaed; something that any decent investigator or attorney easily could have done all those years ago.

Maybe doing criminal defense work is Jarrett Adams' way of making sense of the big sprawl that is his amazing life. It is an expression of humanity and represents hope for the future. ■