

# Locals say it is time for change and answers

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For many African-Americans in the city, the Darryl Hunt case is an example of why the relationship between law enforcement and the black community has been chilly. Blacks say their rights and liberties are far too often trampled on by cops and prosecutors who have no respect for people of color and often, the truth.

"I am hoping now this city will pay attention when people say there is injustice," said state Rep. Larry Womble. Hunt, an African-American, was tried twice and convicted of the murder of white newspaper copy editor Deborah Sykes. DNA evidence has excluded him as the person who raped Sykes, and the man whose DNA was found at the Sykes crime scene said he acted alone. Hunt was released last week after serving close to two decades in prison for the crime.

In the early 1990s, Womble, then a city alderman, held up the Hunt case when he called Winston-Salem a racist city. Womble's characterization of Winston-Salem cost the city the prestigious All-America City Award from the National Civic League. Last



Darryl and April Hunt walk into Emmanuel Baptist Church along with Hunt's long-time friend Larry Little.

week, Womble said the release of Hunt gives the city an opportunity to try to mend the racial divide that has kept blacks separate from whites for so long.

"This is just a first step toward the healing. Lord knows this city needs some healing," he said.

Robert "Hoppy" Elliot, the chairman of the city's Human Relations Commission, called the Hunt release a "teachable"

moment for the city.

"We have to get people to focus on what happened: An innocent man spent close to 19 years in prison, and the reason is because our systems were not responding," Elliot said. "It is not an easy task. We have people who will want to move on and say the system works, but it did not work for Darryl Hunt."

The city's Police Department,

which led the controversial investigation, has taken a beating over the Hunt case. Hunt's release and a widespread belief among blacks that cops worked against Hunt instead of looking for the truth have only added to the rift between the department and blacks.

Mayor Pro Tem Vivian Burke said residents have to feel confident that the department acted on

the up and up in the case. She said the City Council will be addressing the issue of how to help the department build trust. Until the issue is addressed, Burke said, it will hang over the police and the city.

"It is a cloud over the city," she said. Burke and City Council members Nelson Malloy, Joycelyn Johnson and Fred Terry and Mayor Allen Joines were on hand for a homecoming celebration for Hunt last week at Emmanuel Baptist Church. Joines said he hopes the public takes some solace in the fact that a city police detective, Mike Rowe, took the initiative to take a DNA sample from the man who has now been charged in the Sykes case.

"I would hope that since it was a Winston-Salem police detective, I hope that demonstrates there is an openness in the department to want to get some truth," Joines said.

The Forsyth County District Attorney's Office also has dirty hands as a result of the Hunt case, even though current DA Tom Keith was not in office during either of the Hunt trials. Keith's relationship with the black community has never been good. It was made worse last week when

Keith held up the release of Hunt for several hours. Outraged black leaders vowed to work together to address what they called Keith's insensitivity. County Commissioner Walter Marshall, a former head of the local NAACP chapter, said the DA's office and police should let go of egos and try to correct the flaws that were made in the Hunt case.

"The DA should recognize that prosecution should not be about just getting somebody," Marshall said. "We need to make sure that the Police Department is not used to victimize people, but to seek the truth."

The release of Hunt came as the city manager is in the midst of a search process to find a new chief for the Police Department. Current Chief Linda Davis will retire in February.

City Council member Johnson said whoever the new chief is, he or she will inherit baggage.

"Whoever comes, has to come with the skills to deal with that," she said.

The Police Department has agreed to allow the State Bureau of Investigation to work with it in future investigation of the Sykes case. The City Council has applauded that decision.

## Hunt

from page A1

porter. "What happened to him has happened before and it will happen again."

Even as they celebrated, supporters said they were reminded that the legal system doesn't always play fair. Factors of denial and racism — factors that Hunt supporters said played lead roles in his imprisonment in the first place — seemed to rear their ugly heads the night before Hunt's Christmas Eve release.

Supporters had gathered at Emmanuel Baptist Church at 8:30 p.m. on Dec. 23 to wait for Hunt to be released. Hunt's longtime attorney, Mark Rabil, said he had gotten indication that Hunt, who by this time had been relocated to the Forsyth County Jail from a prison in Asheboro, would be released. Supporters waited, waited and waited, sometimes filling the time with prayers. It was almost 10 p.m. when the Rev. John Mendez, pastor of Emmanuel, got a call. The look on his face told the story.

"It is not going to happen," he told supporters.

District Attorney Tom Keith halted the release, saying that he still had more investigation to do. Hunt supporters called that hogwash. They saw the delay as yet another way the system refused to admit its flaws even in light of DNA and logic.

"It is quite clear that the DNA evidence is overwhelming... It looks to me that they are shifting the goalpost," said Larry Little, who was the first to take on Hunt's cause back in 1984.

Rabil was angry that Hunt was made to spend an extra night in jail — so angry that he barricaded himself behind a door for close to half an hour after learning about the delay. He emerged to



Darryl Hunt greets City Council member Nelson Malloy.

address the news media.

"We are baffled that he is in prison and that he will remain there tonight," Rabil said. "There is no reason that Darryl Hunt should be held in jail in further."

### Case without legs

Patrick Hairston didn't need DNA evidence to convince him that Darryl Hunt did not do the things that police and prosecutors said he did. Hairston was the president of the city's NAACP chapter in 1984 when Hunt, then 19, was arrested for the Sykes murder.

"You can't tell me that a 19-year-old with no job would wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning and then think about going to kill a woman," Hairston said as he waited at Emmanuel for Hunt's

release Dec. 24.

The case against Hunt was built on the testimony of a number of people who connected Hunt to the stabbing and rape of Sykes, who was killed after parking her car and walking toward her job at a now-defunct, afternoon newspaper. But the prosecution witnesses were a motley crew of unsavory characters — a prostitute, a drug user and even a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. Hunt was convicted, though, by a jury that had only one black member. Prosecutors wanted the death penalty, but the jury decided on a life sentence.

State Rep. Larry Womble remembers that first trial well. He said the tensions between blacks, who overwhelmingly believed in Hunt's innocence, and whites,

who felt the complete opposite, were volatile. Hunt's release was something that Womble said he knew would happen.

"It is like my grandmother always used to say, 'Truth crushed to the ground will rise again,'" Womble said.

In the Hunt case, truth came in the form of DNA. In 1994 — four years after Hunt won another trial and a second jury, this one all-white, found him guilty once more — it was determined that DNA taken from Sykes' body did not match Hunt's or any of the other men that prosecutors say acted in collusion with Hunt. Anger in the black community grew when the DNA mismatch did not win Hunt his freedom.

That would come nearly 10 years later, when investigators last week found the man whose DNA matched that of the samples taken from the crime scene: That man, Willard Brown, has now been charged in the crime. He has told law enforcement that he acted alone and apologized to Hunt and the city.

"Thank God for DNA," County Commissioner Walter Marshall said. Marshall also has led the local NAACP chapter. He waited for Hunt to arrive at Emmanuel last week because he wanted to witness the end of the Hunt saga just as he had witnessed the ups and downs over the years.

"I felt that he would one day be free, so I am overjoyed right now," Marshall said. "It is a good feeling to know that the system has worked — finally."

### Hunt reborn

Those who are closest to Darryl Hunt say he put his years behind bars to good use. Friends liken his transformation from a 19-year-old street kid to a 38-year-old thoughtful, spiritual man to a metamorphosis.

"He was a street thug, a wino. You would not have wanted your children to be like him," the Rev. Carlton Eversley said, describing the Hunt who went to prison almost two decades ago.

Imam Khalid Griggs said he recognized the longing in Hunt to want to change, to become a better person. Griggs began making trips to prison to see Hunt, often taking him books and other educational items. Griggs said Hunt did more than read the books: He studied them, storing many of



Larry Little wipes tears from his eyes last week.

them to memory.

"Now you can talk to him and ask him about so many books and so many topics," said Griggs. Hunt converted to Islam. He remains close to his faith. His first stop last week after he was released was to the Community Mosque to pray. The mosque, which Griggs leads, had erected a sign a few days before Hunt's release. It read, "Free Darryl Hunt Now, Enough is Enough." Hunt also married while in prison. His wife, April, is the daughter of Griggs.

April Hunt was the first to share with him the news that investigators had found the man whose DNA matched that taken from the Sykes crime scene. At Hunt's homecoming at Emmanuel, he teared up as he thanked his wife, who sat to his left clasping his hand as he made remarks.

"She came into my life when I was really in a downward spiral and picked me up and loved me when I thought no one else in the world could," Hunt said. "She told me that she would never leave me... and that if I could not have you in this life, I would have you in the next."

Little expects Hunt to take on the role of educator now that he is a free man. Little said young people today, especially young black men, need to hear from someone who has been where Hunt has been and seen the things that Hunt has seen.

"I think Darryl Hunt is going to be very helpful to us," Little said.

### Not angry

The crowd at Emmanuel grew completely silent when Hunt finally arrived and spoke. The crowd was not only eager to hear what Hunt had to say, but Hunt is so soft-spoken that any chatter would have made it impossible to hear him.

Hunt took time to publicly and individually thank all those who had helped keep his cause alive over the years — the reverends, the activists and everyday folks. "God blessed me with people (who) kept me strong for the last 19 years," he said.

Hunt said their support was always appreciated, but even he was a little taken aback by the reception he received last week. In addition to the rally at Emmanuel, a support rally spontaneously sprang up for him out-

side of the Forsyth County Jail when he walked out a free man. Supporters were joined at both rallies by every major news media outlet in the Triad and even some from beyond the area.

"I have been overwhelmed since the time I signed the release papers," Hunt said.

Hunt told supporters that he held firm to his belief in God and his innocence during his time behind bars. At one point in the early '90s, prosecutors offered Hunt a plea agreement that would have set him free, but the agreement stipulated that Hunt would have to admit to the crime. Some in his camp admitted that they advised him to take the agreement, but Hunt refused to take the blame for a crime he did not commit.

"I just could not take it," he said.

Hunt said he is not angry or bitter for the years he lost. Anger, he said, is toxic and counterproductive.

"I can't remember who exactly told me this, but they said, 'If you are angry, it destroys you from within,'" Hunt said. "Injustice is hard to deal with itself, but I want to live, and I don't want to die from within."

A day earlier, Hunt supporters were critical of the family of Deborah Sykes. Hunt supporters said the family has wanted someone to pin the crime on instead of pushing for real answers. Hunt expressed no ill will for the family. He said he wished them a resolution and feels their pain.

"Their experience is just as painful as mine or even more," he said.

Hunt said he wanted to sit and watch the sun go down, something so simple that he has not been allowed to do for some time. He said his immediate plans were to take care of his family and return to Winston-Salem State University, where he was studying when he was rearrested after his second trial.

Hunt has to return to court on Feb. 6. At that time, his attorneys and supporters expect his life sentence to be formally vacated.

After that hearing the Hunt team will pursue financial compensation for Hunt from the state, Little said.

"That is something that has to be addressed. You can't take 19 years off this man's life and not expect to compensate him," Little said.

## Moratorium

from page A1

editor, in 1985. Prosecutors sought the death penalty in the case, but the jury, citing its uneasiness over whether Hunt was involved in the crime, decided on a life sentence. In the early 1990s, DNA evidence ruled out Hunt as the person who raped Sykes before the murder, but courts determined that fact was not enough to earn Hunt his freedom. Last week, the man whose DNA matches the samples taken from Sykes' body was charged with her murder and rape. That man, Willard Brown, has told prosecutors that he acted alone.

The growing debate in North Carolina about a moratorium — which would halt executions in the state for two years so that the punishment could be examined for flaws — centers around the contention that the criminal justice system is unkind and unjust to poor black defendants, especially when they are accused of crimes against whites. A moratorium bill has already cleared the N.C. House. The Senate is expected to take up the measure in May when the General Assembly reconvenes. State Rep. Earline Parmon said she will take Hunt's story with her to Raleigh as an example of why the state needs a moratorium.

"We should not execute another person until we make

sure this will never happen again," Parmon said. She and Forsyth County colleague Rep. Larry Womble have been at the forefront of the moratorium movement. In early December, they took part in a rally for Robbie Lyons in front of the Forsyth County Hall of Justice. Lyons, who



Willard Brown

was convicted of killing a Forsyth County store owner, became the seventh person executed in North Carolina since August. There have been a record number of executions in North Carolina this year.

"In a way Darryl Hunt is extremely lucky. Maybe fate was watching over him. He could have been sentenced to death. But by him not being sentenced to death, it gave time for him to save his life," Womble said. Womble fears that with the swift pace at which the state's execution chamber is being used, some like Hunt may have already met their maker.

"What about those people who...are in there graves? We can't bring them back. That is further testament that this should not be a state that we should have that kind of pun-

ishment," Womble said.

There are many, however, opposed to a moratorium. One of the biggest opponents, ironically, is current Forsyth County District Attorney Tom Keith, who was not the DA during Hunt's prosecution but has been viewed by many as reluctant to admit prosecutors made lots of mistakes in the Hunt case. Keith spoke against a moratorium and for victims' rights in 2000 when the Winston-Salem City Council voted to pass a resolution supporting a moratorium. That resolution, along with similar ones from city councils in Charlotte and Greensboro, was sent to the governor and legislators.

Linda Sutton, the convener of the Black Leadership Roundtable, said that if the Hunt case can't sway moratorium opponents, then nothing else will. Sutton, was one of the organizers of the Lyons rally, and the roundtable, a grassroots organization that focuses on social and racial justice issues, has wholeheartedly endorsed a moratorium.

"This is what (moratorium supporters) have been talking about. They could have killed this man for nothing," Sutton said.

Last week, Parmon said she and Womble planned to call Gov. Mike Easley to "hold up" the Hunt case. Easley, the state's former attorney general, has refused to support a moratorium.