

EXONEREE

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her funeral for her child. She did not have the money to hire an attorney so she went into trial with a public defender.

"Every part of me was broken apart and put on display," Bunch said.

Bunch's attorney warned against letting the jury and prosecutors believe they were getting to her, he told her not to let them see her cry.

"So then I was cold and I was heartless and you didn't see that it was all I could do to get in the car after the end of the day because you tore me down," Bunch said.

A forensic analyst with U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms testified he found a faint trace of kerosene in a circular shape in the wood of Bunch's living room floor and found a positive sample in Bunch's son's room. Bunch said the kerosene found in the living room was explained by the previous owner who claimed he had a kerosene heater in there for many years.

Bunch's trial began Feb. 26, 1996, she was found guilty March 4 and sentenced to 60 years for murder and 50 years for arson that April.

"I know most of you want to know if it's like *Orange is the New Black*. Yes, very much. Only there is 20 times more rape, violence, set-ups all those little petty things you see in there, they're happening on a much grander scale," Bunch said.

There were five officers at Bunch's prison who were arrested by the FBI for taking inmates outside the gate of intake and raping them on prison grounds.

"It's horrible there and the only thing you can do is wallow or rise," Bunch said. "For me I had a baby and I wasn't going to leave him out there thinking that I did this horrible thing."

Bunch began her long fight against the justice system. She worked three of the highest paying jobs in the prison. She earned a bachelor's degree and several as-

sociate's degrees and certifications. Bunch wrote hundreds of people weekly asking for help toward her case.

Bunch eventually befriended a pregnant inmate who introduced Bunch to her attorney. With the help of her new attorney and a church volunteer, Bunch obtained the help of Northwestern's Center on Wrongful Convictions in 2007.

"By the time Northwestern came on, I'd already gotten my medical records, knew they hadn't tested me for carbon monoxide, I had my son's autopsy, I knew he died from carbon monoxide poisoning," Bunch said.

CWC subpoenaed the original ATF file that said nothing was found in Bunch's son's room. The file used to convict Bunch was altered and said certain samples came up positive. In 2008 Bunch filed for post-conviction relief which her judge took six months to decide to deny it. Bunch's legal team then appealed to the appellate court.

"It took almost a year after oral arguments before my case was reversed and remanded for a new trial," Bunch said.

The courts decided to not to retry Bunch and 17 years after her arrest, she was finally released.

Since her release, Bunch worked with CWC and the Innocence Project. Bunch is an executive director of the organization JustIs 4 JustUs, founded by a fellow exoneree, Juan Rivera. JustIs 4 JustUs aims to help exonerees with tasks from getting identification cards and building resumes or accompanying them to new places to donating free services, according to their website.

Bunch contacted Abigail Hickman, adjunct lecturer of English at UNCA, after listening to Hickman's podcast on falsely convicted women and women's issues called *The Crime Closet*.

"Her story has impact because she lost so much and we are compelled almost, in some way aren't we, to listen to that and learn from it," Hickman said.

Hickman found Bunch's story to be empowering for everyone.

"You are powerful, you have a voice and any small amount of awareness you can bring to a situation that may not seem connected may affect, and likely will affect, change," Hickman said.

Patrick Bahls, professor of mathematics and director of university honors program at UNCA, found interest in Bunch's story as well. The interdisciplinary nature of the honors program allows Bahls to partake in issues such as prison reform, criminal justice and urban planning.

"The honors program has an obligation for addressing some of these social issues because if the people in that program are purportedly the best and the brightest that our school has to offer, not only should that come with great opportunities, but that should come with great ob-

ligations," Bahls said.

Bahls said he believes the honors program should be preparing students to be great leaders and Bunch's story has the opportunity to teach students about humanity.

"It is important to remember we are not that moment in time, even if a person is put in prison for something they really did do, they're not to be dehumanized, it is not our place to take away their humanity," Bahls said. "They deserved to be treated as human beings."

Through her work, Bunch encourages people to understand they have a place in this fight against the justice system.

"It doesn't matter if you're going to law school, it doesn't matter if you go into politics, wherever you are, whoever you are and whatever skill you have, you can give something," Bunch said.

