



HEATHER CASSANO | Staff Photographer
 Gregory Taylor spent 17 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit before being exonerated with the help of the North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence. Taylor visited Elon Sept. 16 to share his experiences with students, faculty and the community.

Exonerated prisoner weaves message of experience, lessons

Caitlin O'Donnell
 News Editor

Gregory Taylor missed his daughter's high school and college graduations, her wedding and the birth of his grandson, all for a crime he didn't commit.

Taylor, who spent nearly 17 in years in prison before being exonerated earlier this year, visited Elon University Sept. 16 along with Christine Mumma, director of the North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence, to offer the Constitutional Day address as the fall 2010 Law and Humanities Lecturers.

In 1991, Taylor was a typical husband and father who also lived as a functioning addict. While drinking and doing drugs in downtown Raleigh one night, Mumma said Taylor and a friend came across the body of a beaten woman in the middle of a cul-de-sac. Because Taylor's truck had gotten stuck in the mud near the scene of the crime that night, the police assumed Taylor and his friend were involved.

Though he maintained his innocence and no real evidence of his guilt were found, Taylor was arrested, charged with murder and sentenced to life in prison.

When he was first detained, Taylor said he wanted the world to know he was innocent.

"It was the perfect storm of bad luck," he said. "I had a period of hope where I thought that my family would find (someone) to help."

That time never came. Taylor was the first

wrongfully convicted defendant proven innocent by the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission. Mumma said a total of three defendants have been exonerated through the commission, and two others as a result of the Duke Center on Actual Innocence.

"Most who apply (for help) are guilty, but the problem is that some of them are not," Mumma said. "What makes me angry is that we have a justice system with errors, and it takes us so much to identify them."

After exhausting every legal remedy possible, Mumma said Taylor was procedurally barred from pursuing any other options.

That was until Mumma and her colleagues got involved. In September 2009, an eight member panel voted that there was significant evidence for his innocence. Mumma then represented Taylor before three judges who declared him innocent. He was released from prison in February.

According to Mumma, the State Bureau of Investigation mishandled evidence and lab work, reporting that the blood found on Taylor's truck was human blood. In reality, it was from an insect. The SBI is currently under investigation for corruption and their lab director recently lost his job.

Testimonies and other evidence used to prosecute Taylor were also disproven through Mumma's work.

Once a trial leaves the



HEATHER CASSANO | Staff Photographer
 Christine Mumma, director of the North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence, shared details that proved Taylor's innocence.

jury, Mumma said appeals courts no longer want to hear about the facts, they focus simply on the law.

"What we need is a post-conviction process that focuses on the innocence," she said.

During the course of the 17 years he spent in prison, Taylor worked as a librarian and had zero infractions, which Mumma said is nearly impossible.

He said he tried to stay to himself as much as possible to avoid trouble.

"People in prison have their own agendas," he said. "If you stay out of it, they'll leave you alone."

Taylor said his family was a large source of support and rarely missed the chance to visit him and provide encouragement.

"They were there every week and did what they could to lift me up," he said.

Wrestling with innocence while incarcerated is

draining in an entirely different way, Mumma said.

"Being in jail for something you didn't do is completely different than being in there for something you do," she said. "Society should recognize that and take responsibility when exoneration happens."

While Taylor continues to catch up what he missed while in jail, including time with his daughter, cell phones and Facebook, he is also looking ahead to his future.

"It's difficult to look into the future and plan," he said. "I'm still in the transition time. One day I'll feel and know that the transition is over."

For Mumma, the future is simple.

"I want the guilty ones in and the innocent ones out," Mumma said. "For every innocent person in jail, there's a guilty one on the street."

NEWS BRIEFS

Meeting to discuss sustainability on campus

Elon University's Student Sustainability Council will host a Sustainability Town Hall Meeting on from 4:15 - 5:15 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 23 in Lindner Hall. The Environmental Advisory Council, which serves to raise awareness of environmental practices and awareness, will be present to join in the discussion.

The Student Sustainability Council is a group of students with a common interest in environmental issues. All members of the Elon community are welcome to attend the discussion.

Meacham to visit Elon

Jon Meacham, editor of "Newsweek" and author of two New York Times bestsellers, will discuss "Andrew Jackson and the Art of Leadership: Old Hickory in a New Century" at 7:30 p.m., Sept. 27, in McCrary Theater.

Meacham, the Baird Pulitzer Prize Lecturer, will describe Jackson's ascent to power and the tools he used to maintain it.

Meacham is a 1991 graduate of the University of the South. His latest book is titled "American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House."

School of Communications publishes journal

Elon University's School of Communications published the fall issue of its academic journal, The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications. The issue contains 10 articles by students with subjects ranging from the Daily Show to health communication research and public relations framing of a merger.

The fall issue marks the second issue for the journal, which was first published in the spring. The journal is the first of its kind in the country. Journal editor Byung Lee, a communications associate professor, assembled an editorial board of 17 School of Communications faculty members who participated in the selection process of the student work.

Patel to discuss economic structure of the nation

Raj Patel, author of "The Value of Nothing: How to Reshape Market Society and Redefine Democracy," will visit Elon at 7:30 p.m., Sept. 28, in McCrary Theatre.

Patel will discuss the current economic crisis within the United States and the possibility of creating a fairer society and sustainable economy.

Elon alums recognized as Teachers of the Year

Debra Hennelly, a 1988 graduate, was recognized as Teacher of the Year for Stokes County. Hennelly teaches math at Southeastern Stokes Middle School.

Tyronna McKoy Hooker, a 2009 graduate of Elon University's master of education program, was recently recognized as the Teacher of the Year for the Alamance Burlington School System. Hooker teaches exceptional children at Graham Middle School. She was awarded the MidCarolina Bank Excellence in Education award, which includes \$2,000 for the winning teacher and \$1,000 for his or her school.

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