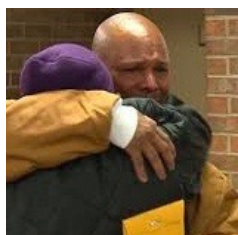


THE NATIONAL REGISTRY  
OF EXONERATIONS[BROWSE CASES](#)[ISSUES](#)[RESOURCES](#)[ABOUT US](#)[MAKE A GIFT](#)**3,102 EXONERATIONS SINCE 1989**  
**MORE THAN 27,080 YEARS LOST**

## DANNY BURTON

### Other Wayne County, Michigan exonerations



Danny Burton embraces his mother, Viola, upon release (Photo: WXYZ TV)

On May 2, 1987, 20-year-old Leonard Ruffin was found fatally shot in an alley in Detroit, Michigan.

A day later, police arrested 17-year-old **Paul Young**. At first, Young insisted that he was with 19-year-old Danny Burton, 18-year-old **David Owens**, and another friend, Clara Hill, in a hotel at the time of the crime. However, Young subsequently confessed to involvement and implicated Owens and Burton.

On June 12, 1987, police arrested Burton. Owens fled and was not arrested until January 1988.

In the meantime, in August 1987, Burton and Young went to trial in Wayne County Circuit Court. The prosecution contended that Burton, Young, Owens, and Ruffin were working for a major crack cocaine ring and were responsible for delivering crack and picking up money from houses where crack was sold. The prosecution contended that Owens killed Ruffin, and that Young and Burton helped dump the body in the alley.

The prosecution's case was based on the testimony of four witnesses who were in a crack house and claimed they saw Ruffin's murder: Lula Gilchrist, who rented the house where the crack was sold; Gilchrist's brother, Andrew "Lavon" Williams; Gilchrist's daughter, Felicia; and Alfreda Jackson. Some of the testimony was conflicting, but they testified that Ruffin was shot walking from Gilchrist's crack house to the car he was driving—a blue Pontiac Trans Am that belonged to Burton.

Felicia Gilchrist testified that Young was upset because Ruffin had stolen \$1000 in drug money earlier on the day of the shooting.

Ruffin's death came just one day after he had been hired to make deliveries of crack and pickups of cash.

Williams and Gilchrist testified that they accompanied Young, Burton, and Owens to dump the body. Prior to the trial, a judge had barred the prosecution from using Young's confession based on evidence that Detroit Police Detective Ronald Sanders kicked Young in the groin and kept him locked in a room until he confessed.

On September 1, 1987, the jury convicted Young and Burton of first-degree murder. They were each sentenced to life in prison without parole.

On November 18, 1988, Owens was convicted of second-degree murder and illegal use of a weapon and sentenced to 25 years in prison.

In 2003, Burton wrote to Claudia Whitman, who directs the National Capital Crime Assistance Network and has helped exonerate numerous people

State:	Michigan
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County:	Wayne
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Most Serious Crime:	Murder
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Additional Convictions:	Illegal Use of a Weapon
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Reported Crime Date:	1987
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Convicted:	1987
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Exonerated:	2019
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Sentence:	Life without parole
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Race/Ethnicity:	Black
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Sex:	Male
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Age at the date of reported crime:	19
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Contributing Factors:	Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct
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Did DNA evidence contribute to the exoneration?:	No
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wrongfully convicted. Whitman began investigating the case. Ultimately, Young's lawyer, Joan Morgan obtained statements from Gilchrist, Felicia, and Jackson admitting that Sanders coerced them to falsely implicate Burton, Owens, and Young.

Felicia said that Sanders had paid her \$40 to \$60 on about 10 occasions, and had threatened to take away her children unless she testified for the prosecution. Lula said that Sanders threatened to charge her with murder until she implicated Young, Owens and Burton. Jackson said she was high on crack when Sanders wrote out a statement for her and she signed it without reading it. She said her trial testimony was based on what Lula and Felicia Gilchrist said had happened.

In 2007, Young's attorney moved to vacate Young's convictions based on the recantations. That motion, however, was denied.

Owens remained in prison until September 6, 2014.

In 2018, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office formed a Conviction Integrity Unit to examine innocence claims of defendants. Burton, who by then was represented by attorney Solomon Radner, sought review of his case. By that time, Young and Owens had been released on parole.

In addition to the recantations, Burton's team had obtained a sworn affidavit from Clara Hill, who Young originally said was with him, Owens, and Burton in a hotel room when they learned of Ruffin's murder.

Hill said that at the time she was only 14 and was subjected to interrogation by Detective Sanders. She said that in an attempt to force her to implicate Burton, Young and Owens, she was locked in a closet and kept there even after she urinated on herself. No adults besides the officers were present during her interrogation. Ultimately, Hill refused to make a statement and she was released.

The lawyers also had a statement from Ruffin's cousin, DeAndre Bolden, who was in the car when Ruffin was shot. Bolden said that Owens, Young, and Burton were not involved. Another witness, a 16-year-old friend of Felicia, said that she and Felicia were together at the time of the crime and did not see it occur. And Hill provided a statement saying that she was with Burton, Young, and Owens at the time of the crime.

On December 6, 2019, following a re-investigation by the Conviction Integrity Unit under the direction of Valerie Newman, the prosecution agreed to vacate Burton's conviction and dismissed the case. He was immediately released.

Prosecutor Kym Worthy, in a statement, said the case was dismissed "based upon a finding of new evidence that undermines the reliability of Mr. Burton's conviction. The (office) will not be re-trying the case."

In 2020, Burton filed a claim for compensation from the state of Michigan and was later that year awarded \$1.6 million. Also in 2020, Burton filed a federal lawsuit against the city of Detroit, the Detroit police department and Sanders. In 2021, Burton's sons filed their own lawsuit against Sanders, claiming that his actions leading to their father's wrongful conviction had caused them "severe emotional distress."

Young remained in prison until June 25, 2019. On September 16, 2021, Worthy's office vacated Young's conviction and dismissed the case after an investigation uncovered new witnesses who placed Young at a motel several miles away from the crime scene at the time the shooting occurred. Owens's conviction was vacated, and his case dismissed for the same reasons on November 30, 2021.

– *Maurice Possley*

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[Report an error or add more information about this case.](#)

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Posting Date: 12/13/2019  
Last Updated: 1/24/2022

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## ABOUT THE REGISTRY

The National Registry of Exonerations is a project of the Newkirk Center for Science & Society at University of California Irvine, the University of Michigan Law School and Michigan State University College of Law. It was founded in 2012 in conjunction with the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law. The Registry provides detailed information about every known exoneration in the United States since 1989—cases in which a person was wrongly convicted of a crime and later cleared of all the charges based on new evidence of innocence. The Registry also maintains a more limited database of known exonerations prior to 1989.

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