



Firefly Advocates hopes to help people ensared in the criminal justice system navigate it and fight back.

Shaya Baum doesn't want to say which Whole Foods market it was, because it does him no good to get crosswise with the police again.

What he did there was prevent a desperate woman from getting arrested for shoplifting. In a way, it was the first step toward what he's doing now, which is trying to get a convicted murderer out of prison.

Nosakhare Onumonu, 46, had been less than a model citizen before he was sentenced to life without parole for killing 84-year-old Helen Klocek, of

Plymouth Township. But his defenders say he was victimized at trial in 2015 by hidden evidence and police officers' blatant lies, and then again in late 2022 by an arrogant judge.

Baum, 38, founded a nonprofit early last year called Firefly Advocates. Its formidable goals are to upend wrongful convictions, help those for whom small fines are mammoth roadblocks, and work toward what seem like commonsense reforms once somebody says them out loud.

Onumonu has a date in Detroit on Thursday with the Michigan Court of Appeals, and he could wind up being Firefly's first major victory.

Ideally, said the lawyer who's representing him through Firefly, he'll get a new trial. Failing that, he should be in line for an evidentiary hearing, a sort of mini-trial with witnesses and documents and hope.

Worst case, he'll be rejected altogether, even after a Wayne County judge ordered a new trial nearly two years ago and said point blank that "I believe that there is a significant possibility of the actual innocence of Mr. Onumonu."

Whatever the outcome, Onumonu will keep churning forward. He's become good at jailhouse lawyering, and there's little else to do with his time.

Baum is awash in obligations, but he'll keep churning, too.

"The deck is so stacked against some people," Baum said, that they're hardly participating in the same justice system as those with more wealth or clout. "How do we reshuffle the cards?"

He has some ideas. They're descended, he'll tell you, from his day job, where he's the owner of a company called Wing Lake Capital Partners in Farmington Hills that also focuses on underdogs.

Specifically, it helps businesses that made bad situations worse by borrowing from merchant cash advance companies, the commercial equivalents of a payday loan storefront except that they're less regulated and frequently more vicious.

Even before Firefly, Baum was working too hard and sleeping too little. His key employees can vouch for his hours; when he has an inspiration at 3 a.m., it usually means someone's cellphone is about to ping.

His own chime rang the day he watched a mother with two young kids get stopped by police at Whole Foods. She had tucked bread and cheese beneath her jacket, he said, and officers were placing her under arrest.

Wait a minute, Baum interrupted, surprising himself more than anyone else. How can she be shoplifting if she hasn't left the store yet? And what if I pay for her food?



Shaya Baum sits in the sleek Farmington Hills lobby of Wing Lake Capital Partners, which helps businesses regroup after getting buried in the business equivalent of payday loans. The nonprofit Baum launched in 2023, a prisoner exoneration and advocacy group called Firefly Advocates, will see the first major hearing for a client on Thursday.

"The cops were really upset with me," he said, and he didn't understand why. He sent the woman off to fill a cart with whatever she needed, and told the officers that they should be thanking him, not glowering at him.

He was saving them the trouble of making an arrest, and keeping the worst-case dominoes from toppling. The mom didn't get hauled away and her kids didn't get put in foster care and she didn't get a criminal check mark that would keep her from working and maybe not having to steal.

Best of all, the kids were going to eat.

Hungry for success

The situation was essentially the plot of "Les Miserables" — which Baum hasn't seen.

He's been busy, pretty much since childhood.

The seventh of nine children, he was raised in Oak Park in a household where his father would become a successful lawyer, but remained a student until Baum was 10 years old.

"I remember what it's like going to bed hungry," he said. "It's not a good feeling."

His response was to hustle: "selling Gatorade at the park, cutting grass, shoveling snow." By 19, he said, he had founded two tax preparation companies in New York City before selling them both to come home and get a degree from Wayne State.

By not much older than that, Onumonu was in prison.

A felony for diapers

The oldest of Denise Onumonu's five children is "very respectful. Religious. A quiet, laid-back guy. That was the foundation I laid for him," she said.

In their northwest Detroit neighborhood, at age 9 or 10, "he was cutting grass in the community," she said. "A lot of neighbors would tell me my sons were the only ones they would allow to cut their grass."

Later, he began blending gospel with rap, a connection to his roots at Greater Faith Ministries.

In August of 1999, at 22, he pulled a knife and robbed the clerk at a Dearborn Heights adult novelty store.

The chapter and verse of his record is not sympathetic reading, though his mother, 67, tries to understand. Out of work, Denise Onumonu said, and

imbued by a foolhardy young man's sense of duty to a girlfriend with twins, he had robbed the shop for money to buy Pampers.

Only two months after pleading guilty — inflamed, his mother said, by a letter from the woman — he walked away from a minimum security prison in Ionia County and robbed a gas station, holding a pair of scissors to the side of the female cashier.

Tack on 10 years for a sharpened 7-inch length of antenna he claimed that a guard had planted in his waistband in 2002, and he was due to be behind bars until his release on parole in February 2012.

He never left.

The victim and the campaign

Tiny Helen Klocek ate French toast and crispy bacon on the late morning of March 2, 1999, at Ill Brothers Family Restaurant in Plymouth.

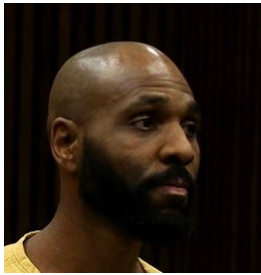
She drove off in her white 1992 Ford Escort sedan, and the next time anyone reported seeing her, she lay beaten and choked to death in an alley behind a church on Joy Road on the west side of Detroit.

Solomon Radner, a civil rights attorney by trade, is certain Onumonu did not kill her. Firefly isn't paying his usual rate, but it's providing enough that he can at least afford to take the case.

"I've held million-dollar checks, said Radner, 40, "and that feels pretty good." But he has walked a few innocent people out of prison, working pro bono, and "that's the most rewarding thing I've done as a lawyer."

He and Baum have been friends since childhood, so it was an easy yes when he was asked to review Onumonu's file. What he read, he said, made it an even easier yes to stepping in.

Okumonu can be blunt and headstrong, Radner said, but he's used to that with prisoners. Decades behind bars reinforce that "nobody gives a damn about them but them," he said, "and they know their case better than anybody else."



Nosakhare Onumonu in 2015.

The edginess isn't personal, and the net effect for Onumonu is that by arguing for himself via Zoom, he was able to persuade Judge Tracy Green of the Wayne County 3rd Circuit to acknowledge the likelihood of certain errors and flat-out agree that other elements of his conviction had involved fraud.

'Unclean hands' and a suspension

Klocek's partially torched Ford was found several days after the murder, behind a church 3 miles from her battered body. Her purse was found a day after the car, in an alley where one of two early suspects was known to buy drugs.

The suspects are one of the issues raised by Onumonu. Police never mentioned them, and, in fact, claimed there were none when they explained why a glass worker's Kevlar glove found in the car's back seat — we'll get back to that — wasn't sent for DNA analysis until 2008.

The key witness for the prosecution had seen Klocek driving the day of the murder with a Black man as her passenger, appearing to give directions. She described him as having a light complexion, medium build and light eyes, none of which apply to Onumonu.

A sketch based on the original description was never provided to the defense. A more damning likeness was used at trial, after charges were dismissed in two preliminary examinations in the span between charges being brought in November 2011 and a jury finally being seated in July 2015.

The most vital piece of evidence for the prosecution was the glove.

Onumonu had, in fact, worked for a glass company at one point. But in the affidavit to obtain a sample of his DNA, police said the glove had been found near the body, not in an Escort miles away.

More inflammatory, as far as Onumonu's team is concerned, is that the glove did not turn up on an inventory of the contents of the car until 2008. The affidavit for the warrant to obtain his DNA claimed it was found near the body, which was untrue, a lie that Radner says might have kept it from the trial.

Beyond that, the attorney said, "We don't know where the hell the glove came from, or who had it. All we know is that it took nine years to get there.

"You know what we call that in the legal world? Reasonable doubt."

Green, the judge, said the police department "has unclean hands here" as she ordered a new trial in 2022. Unfortunately for Onumonu, hers also needed a scrubbing: As the Free Press reported in 2023, she was suspended from the bench for six months for helping her son cover up the abuse of his two boys before her election in 2018.

Also unfortunately for Onumonu, Green issued conflicting orders, for both a retrial and an evidentiary hearing.

Though she clarified her intentions via email, the visiting judge handling her cases bulldozed through Onumonu's responses at a follow-up hearing, took his protestations as a refusal to cooperate, and left him with nothing.

That ruling is the subject of Thursday's appeal, and Baum's continuing ire — or at least part of it. The more he deals with the legal system, he said, the more it makes him sputter.

Solutions and frustrations

Baum says the nature of his business, helping companies restructure while they fend off the most rapacious of the merchant cash advance firms, might leave him pursuing or defending dozens of lawsuits at a time.

He's a grinder, he said, with little time or interest in the things success is supposed to bring.

For security reasons, he wants to keep some basic details of his life private, but he still lives in the 1,500-square-foot Oakland County starter home he bought when he was 25, next door to his grandparents.

Until recently, he drove a 2017 Buick. Then he took over the lease on an Audi SUV a friend had left in his parking lot, with all-wheel-drive and any number of features he hasn't figured out yet.

He joined a country club two years ago, but said he has only played there twice.

"I never feel good," he said. "That's my problem. In my mind, it's, 'What have I not gotten to?' "

Firefly helped one man who'd been offered 17 years in prison as a plea bargain on sexual assault and gun charges. The nonprofit found phone records that showed he'd been in Warren when the assault occurred in Detroit, and the prison sentence ultimately dropped to two years.

A landscaper at the park near his office needed to get out from under a fine so he could move on with his life. Easy. A \$500 bond disappeared for someone whose court case fortuitously came before one of Wing Lake's appearances — a simple gesture if you have the money, an insurmountable burden if you don't. A woman charged with vehicular homicide wound up with six months of probation after an attorney enlisted by Firefly proved she was being attacked.

"He never gives himself credit," said colleague Doris Houchins., and Baum's response was reflexive:

"Celebrating doesn't help the next guy."

There are more dragons, he's finding, than lances to fight them with.

Why, for instance, are telephone fees so usurious for the people in prison who can least afford them, when their friends on the outside can practically call Mars for \$20 a month?

"Simple fix," he said. "Let them call their families for free. Or incentivize it — if you're doing drug counseling or working toward a degree, it's free."

And: want to keep people out of jail? Help them keep their jobs, when cars are expensive and it takes three buses and two hours to go pack parts at a warehouse in Troy.

"Start a program to Uber people to work," he said. Get Uber to kick in, enlist a nonprofit, maybe encourage employers to pony up in their own best interests.

"Everybody's happy," he said, and parents are home in 30 minutes to be with their kids.

Most of the time, he said, a solution is just an idea and a few phone calls away.

Or, maybe this week, an appeal.

One of the things Onumonu has talked about, Baum said, is working on the outside to help people who've been wrongly convicted. He has already sent Firefly some names.

Chances are Baum can find him a desk.

References

1. Detroit Free Press