



Exonerated returning citizen rises from tragedy to triumph

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Leon Benson grew up in Flint, Michigan.

"Unfortunately, I grew up in a drug home where my mother and father sold pills, weed and cough syrup," Benson recently explained in an interview with the Courier.

Although Benson talked about how his parents would play the lottery in hopes of getting out of poverty, Benson has many fond memories from his younger years in Flint.

"I went to Civic Park Elementary, Longfellow Middle School and Northern High School," he said. "It was fun to me."

Benson was very much into mixed tapes and performed in the high school talent show.

In 1999, Leon Benson was wrongfully convicted of the murder of Kasey Schoen in Indianapolis. At the Correctional Industrial Facility in Pendleton, he witnessed many killings and suicides. He saw many other mental healthy people deteriorate right before his eyes.

Because he was accused of participating in a riot in prison, Benson had to spend a decade in solitary confinement. Although he was in college at the time, that was voided. Still, he said the time that was meant to be isolation became a time of solitude for him. Although he said he was a victim of a corrupt system and "severe systematic trauma," it was a spiritual journey.

"I turned it into a university. But everybody who goes through things like that are affected, and I am."

Benson was only 22 when he was sentenced. He is now 47 and is an exonerated returning citizen with forgiveness in his heart and a willingness to bless other.

After serving 25 years of a 61-year-sentence, the Flint native was exonerated in March of 2023. He is currently living in Detroit.

Benson's case was championed by The Racial Justice Clinic at the University of San Francisco and led by all-star attorney and author Lara Bazelon. It was investigated by the University of San Francisco School of Law's Racial Justice Clinic and the Marion County Prosecutor's Office Conviction Integrity Unit.

The way things finally started lining up for Benson seem almost miraculous!

Benson, who considered himself a "jailhouse lawyer" because of the way he helped others with their cases, also said he has been the biggest fighter for himself. Among many other things, on his Free Leon Benson Cause Page on Facebook, he asked his supporters to send letters of support. He received 21 letters in the following weeks. One of those letters was from Shannon Coleman, a Black woman from Philadelphia.

"She thought I was innocent. She had helped someone else who was wrongfully incarcerated in the state of Pennsylvania. His name was Anthony Wright. The irony was Anthony Wright was accused of murdering and raping her great aunt. But the DNA came back and showed he was actually innocent."

Benson and Coleman became friends. By December 2020, she had connected Benson with the Conviction Integrity Unit. Coleman also knew Lara Bazelon.

"It's an incredible feeling to help right a wrong inflicted by the criminal legal system, and it is an honor to be a part of Leon's legal team," said Charlie Nelson Keever. "On the one hand, it is pretty inspiring that so many people came together over many years to support Leon and get him some justice. On the other, it's kind of harrowing that it in fact required all of those people – Leon's family who never gave up on him, his friends and supporters like Shannon Coleman (who is the reason we got to be Leon's lawyers), his legal team including our wonderful students, *and* the cooperation of the Marion County Prosecutor's Office – to free *one* innocent man. It really shows what a herculean effort is required even in the most righteous cases and how the legal system is not designed to correct its errors."



Charlie Nelson Keever

The Suspect true crime podcast is featuring an eight-part series about the fact of Benson's case, from his arrest to his exoneration. The podcast shows how not only did the investigation revealed evidence against Benson did not exist, but police actually suppressed evidence pointing to another man!

On June 26, Benson, known as EL BENTLY 448, dropped his debut EP, Innocent Born Guilty, on Die Jim Crow Records, with the first video to drop being titled "Innocent." Die Jim Crow Records is the first non-profit record label in the United States for currently and formerly incarcerated artists.

As an artist, Benson weaves poetry, philosophy and world history into his music. He is inspired by Black-led social justice movements.

"With time and experience, a lot of things just go into your subconscious," he said. "You are a product of your thoughts and your thought life."

Charlie Nelson Keever said: "I am totally in awe of anyone who chooses to share parts of themselves through their art. Leon has such unique experiences and insight which he infuses into his music– the result is music that is poignant, clever and catchy. It grabs your attention and also challenges you which I think are both hallmarks of good art. "

Benson said one of the things he frowns upon is people who go through their particular trials and they learn nothing-not for themselves or for others.



Leon Benson Image Courtesy of DJC Records

Not only is Benson sharing his story of overcoming through his music, he is involved with the Everly Collective, a wellness center in downtown Flint. The center had an opening event on June 29. According to the Everly Collective's website, the Everly Collective is a hub for health equity and social justice, innovation through collaborative enterprise, development and community engagement. Benson serves has been serving as a founding advisor. Dr. Crystallee Crain brought the center to the city.

Benson even has his own new clothing line!

"I'm all about bringing back good stuff to Flint. Because of my world view, everybody wants me to be from their town, but I'm from Flint, Michigan."

With a prison population of about 2.3 million, according to the National Registry of Exonerations, the rate of wrongful convictions in the U.S. is estimated to be somewhere between 2% and 10%. Benson pointed out some of these people could be over sentenced, charged with the wrong charge or a combination of both, in addition to those who are completely innocent.