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Detroit convicted in '82 cleared of rape

He prepares to face everyday life again

BY JOE SWICKARD • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • MAY 22, 2008

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Walter Swift, convicted rapist, entered the courtroom Wednesday to the frenzied din of motor-drive camera shutters.



AMY LEANG/DFP

Walter Swift, 47, hugs his daughter Audrey Kelly Mills, 27 -- who he had not seen since he went to prison when she was an infant -- after being released Wednesday in Detroit. "Now, he's a free man. I got my daddy for Father's Day," Mills said.



AMY LEANG/DFP

Walter Swift steps out of prison Wednesday in Detroit for the first time since he was convicted of raping a young mother in her Indian Village home in 1982. "I know it's a beautiful time right now," said Swift, 47.

Walter Swift, innocent man, left waving as applause and cries of thanks filled the basement courtroom of Wayne County Circuit Judge Vera Massey Jones.

In a day of giddy relief for Swift's family, Swift was cleared of raping and robbing a young mother in her Indian Village home in 1982 and freed after almost 26 years in prison.

"I know it's a beautiful time right now, but life will start to get back to reality," said Swift, 47. "This is a million light-years from where I was. ... I can't describe the distance and time."

Wednesday was a surreal swirl -- from breakfast at the Wayne County Jail to a ride in the front seat of boxing boss Emanuel Steward's Mercedes-Benz S430 and a catered banquet luncheon atop Sindbad's on the Detroit River.

"You know, about a week ago I was sitting on bench looking out on a prison yard with nothing but hope," Swift said.

After an 11-year campaign, the Innocence Project --

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the legal group headed by Barry Scheck that investigates wrongful convictions -- convinced Wayne County prosecutors to dismiss the charges against Swift based on a faulty identification by the victim and biological tests that indicated Swift probably was not her attacker. The evidence never was presented at trial.

"Once in a lifetime," Scheck quoted Nobel poet laureate Seamus Heaney to Judge Jones, "The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up."

"I'm grateful that we're going to do something right today," the judge said.

Later, Swift said he knows the daily mundane tasks of life on the outside - - unfamiliar to a man who never has driven a car and only Wednesday made his first cell-phone calls -- will tug at him.

"I'd rather deal with that," he said. "That's a good problem."

Swift awkwardly embraced his daughter Audrey Kelly Mills, 27. He had not seen or touched her since he went to prison when she was an infant.

"He was taken away for no good reason," she said. "But now, he's a free man. I got my daddy for Father's Day."

Irish lawyer Niamh Gunn was a key member of Swift's team since she first encountered the case five years ago as a visiting intern with the Innocence Project. She tracked down witnesses and uncovered the questionable evidence.

She returned from Ireland to share in Swift's freedom.

"It's great. Isn't it brilliant?" Gunn said.

Steward was brought into the case a year ago by a lawyer who represented former heavyweight champ Lennox Lewis and who works with Scheck.

"Walter and I are from the same neighborhood -- Indian Village below Mack Avenue," Steward said. "I know people talk about DNA, but forget the DNA and just look at the description. Nothing matched -- age, mustache, no mustache, size -- nothing. I said 'This can't be right.' "

Steward said he is giving Swift a place to live and a job with his boxing organization.

After lunch, the Swift entourage returned to the courthouse steps for a news conference with Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy.

Worthy said she was not pronouncing Swift an innocent man wrongly convicted. Rather, she said, the case was dismissed because there "were irregularities and things that should not have happened."

To find out more, go to



AMY LEANG/DFP

Swift hugs Niamh Gunn, an attorney who began work on getting Swift out of jail as an intern at the Innocence Project, on Wednesday.

PHOTO GALLERIES

Walter Swift, wrongly convicted free after 26 yrs.

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bigfellalo wrote:

Good Luck sir!
5/22/2008 9:47:56 AM

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senorsandman wrote:

Yes, It's a very sad situation that he had to spend 26 years behind bars for justice to be finally realized. Maybe things were different when he got convicted however that does not justify the DA in trying to cobble up some kind of charge that might stick, just to get someone behind bars.
Ohh, and by the way, the real rapist got a new leaf on life. You call that justice? Although you cannot change the past, maybe we can spend some resources in finding the real scumbag rapist.
5/22/2008 9:03:35 AM

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SNOWTHROWER wrote:

just why do you arrest and convict a person that does not come close the the description given by the victim?I guess the DA is just happy to accuse someone,anyone and close the case.nice going Mr. Sheck and your organization.
5/22/2008 8:28:50 AM

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Archimedes wrote:

Replying to outofmichigan:

No visits? I find it odd and sad that he hasn't seen his daughter since before going to prison, but I'll refrain from commenting on it any further because I don't know the story behind the story.

maybe because his daughter didn't want to see her father behind bars
5/22/2008 8:21:45 AM

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outofmichigan wrote:

No visits? I find it odd and sad that he hasn't seen his daughter since before going to prison, but I'll refrain from commenting on it any further because I don't know the story behind the story.
5/22/2008 8:18:01 AM

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 Top stories
 Lotteries
 Election
 2008
 Nation/World
 Business

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 Lions
 Pistons
 Red Wings
 Tigers
 U-M
 Wolverines
 MSU
 Spartans
 High School
 Sports
 Scores
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 Shock
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