Wrongfully convicted man recalls death row

By Sandee Richardson
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Friends from Walter McMillan's past visit him in his dreams. He met them in a stretch of cipher-block cells at Atmore's Holman Prison — Alabama's death row.

"I got to be real close friends with a lot of those guys. We'd go to chapel together and exercise together," he said.

"But there were mornings when we'd wake up and see an empty cell. Every time it happened, the emotions were just the same. It made it hard to get back together," he said.

Eight men were executed in Alabama's electric chair while McMillan was in prison.

Now 57, McMillan, a Monroeville resident, spent six years on death row for a murder he did not commit. He was released in 1993 after his 1988 conviction was overturned — the only man ever freed from Alabama's death row.

McMillan was arrested in 1987 for the November 1986 murder of Ronda Renee Morrison, an 18-year-old Monroeville resident. She was fatally shot at the cleaners where she worked. The murder trial lasted two days and ended with a death sentence.

McMillan's freedom came after Montgomery County lawyer Bryan Stevenson obtained partial recantations from three witnesses and unearthed evidence of police misconduct, which led the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals to overturn McMillan's conviction.

After his release, McMillan moved back to his hometown of Monroeville.

"It's been pretty rough, but then again it's been good, too. It's hard to get it back together. I've had to learn how to live all over again," McMillan said.

McMillan again faced harsh times in 1995. He broke his neck while cutting down a tree. A self-employed pulp woodcutter before his arrest, McMillan went back to work for a friend after his release. He said he was on the job when the accident happened.

McMillan said his most difficult challenge is being a former inmate. However, he said, "It doesn't bother me in the least to see him (McMillan)."

Tate would not say whether he believes McMillan was owed an apology.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," Tate said. "You're just going to twist this around. I know what you're going to do."

Stevenson said he believes race was a factor in McMillan's case and in the cases of many other blacks who are charged with a felony crime.

A 1997 U.S. House Judiciary Committee report documented the number of African Americans who had been released from death row because the killer of a white person is far more likely to receive the death penalty than the killer of a black person.

Stephen Bright agrees with those findings. He's director of the Southern Center for Human Rights, an Atlanta-based legal organization that defends people facing the death penalty.

"If you get the death penalty does not depend on the crime you committed, it depends on what lawyer is appointed to defend you," Bright said. "What makes a death case is an African-American charged with a crime against a white person."