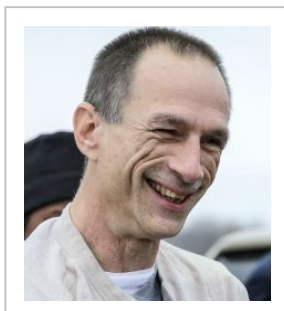


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CHRISTOPHER ABERNATHY



On October 3, 1984, 15-year-old Kristina Hickey disappeared while walking home from a high school choir performance in Park Forest, Illinois. Her body was found two days later behind a shopping mall. She had been raped and stabbed.

More than a year later, on November 30, 1985, police brought in 18-year-old Christopher Abernathy for questioning after an acquaintance, Allan Dennis, told

police that several months earlier Abernathy had admitted killing Hickey. Abernathy had attended Hickey's funeral—as did several hundred other teenagers—and was heard saying that he had a gun in his car and intended to fire a salute afterward. Police checked Abernathy out at that time, but decided the comment was not serious.

After more than 40 hours of interrogation, Abernathy, a high school dropout who had been classified as learning disabled, signed a confession saying he saw her walking home and wanted to have sex with her. When she refused, he attempted to rape her and then accidentally stabbed her with a pocket knife he had in his hand. Almost immediately, Abernathy recanted the confession and said he signed the statement because police told him he could go home to his mother if he did.

Abernathy went to trial in Cook County Circuit Court in January 1987. The evidence against him was the testimony of Dennis, who said that Abernathy had admitted the crime to him, and Abernathy's confession.

No forensic or physical evidence connected Abernathy to the crime. Presumptive tests were negative for the presence of semen.

On January 15, 1987, a jury convicted Abernathy of first-degree murder, aggravated criminal sexual assault, and armed robbery. Because he was 17 at the time of the crime, Abernathy was not eligible for the death penalty. Instead, he was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

More than 15 years later, journalism students at Northwestern University began investigating the case and Dennis recanted his trial testimony. Dennis said that Abernathy had not confessed, but that police pressured him to implicate Abernathy. He said police promised to get him lenient treatment on some pending minor charges and gave him \$300 to buy clothes to come to court—benefits that were not disclosed to Abernathy's defense attorney at trial.

The Northwestern students brought the results of their investigation to a law firm where attorney Lauren Kaeseberg began preliminary work on the case. In 2013, Kaeseberg

State:	Illinois
County:	Cook
Most Serious Crime:	Murder
Additional Convictions:	Rape, Robbery
Reported Crime Date:	1984
Convicted:	1987
Exonerated:	2015
Sentence:	Life without parole
Race:	Caucasian
Sex:	Male
Age at the date of crime:	17
Contributing Factors:	False Confession, Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct
Did DNA evidence contribute to the exoneration?:	Yes

started working for the Illinois Innocence Project at the University of Illinois in Springfield, Illinois. In 2014, Kaeseberg asked the Cook County State's Attorney's Conviction Integrity Unit to examine the case.

In August 2014, pursuant to an agreement between the Illinois Innocence Project and the Cook County Conviction Integrity Unit, an order was entered to conduct DNA testing. Eight different items were tested, including a vaginal swab, clothing of the victim and her purse. Abernathy's DNA was not found on any of the evidence but a partial DNA profile of a different person was found on the eight items tested. The profile was not complete enough to submit to a DNA database, but the prosecution agreed with the defense team that the testing excluded Abernathy as the perpetrator of the crime.

On February 11, 2015, the Conviction Integrity Unit requested that Abernathy's convictions be vacated. The motion was granted and the charges were dismissed.

Abernathy was released the same day and was greeted by his family, including his mother, who had visited Abernathy in prison nearly 1,000 times during the nearly 30 years he was incarcerated.

– *Maurice Possley*

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Posting Date: 2/13/2015

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