

OH man pushes to end death penalty

Ajamu was wrongly imprisoned for 28 years

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AKRON, OH – A Cleveland man had an epiphany while in prison in May 1990 for a murder he didn't commit.

His mom had just died, and he lost his first bid for parole.

That's when Ronnie Bridgeman died and Kwame Ajamu was born.

'I decided I needed to start over,' Ajamu recalled. 'It was time to reinvent.'

Kwame means 'born on Saturday,' and represented the passing of his mother, while Ajamu means 'he fights for what he wants.'

What Ajamu wanted most was for him, his brother and his best friend to be released from prison. The three were initially sentenced to death for a 1975 murder. Ajamu eventually realized his goal when he was paroled in 2003. His brother Wiley Bridgeman and friend Ricky Jackson were released from prison in 2014.

After being declared innocent by a judge in February 2015, the three men won multi-million-dollar settlements for wrongful imprisonment in multiple court cases.

Ajamu, 67, decided to dedicate the rest of his life to fighting for the end of the death penalty. He served as the board chairman of Witness to Innocence, a national group of death row exonerees, from 2015 until earlier this year.

'It's just wrong to kill someone,' Ajamu said in a recent interview. 'State-sanctioned execution is nothing but idle-hand murder.'

Nationwide, at least 200 people sentenced to death since 1973 have been exonerated, according to the Death Penalty Information Center.

Ajamu was only 17 when he, his brother and friend were arrested for the murder of Harold Franks, 59, a money order salesman, during a Cleveland robbery on May 19, 1975.

The three young men – Wiley Bridgeman was 20 and Jackson was 18 – were identified as the people responsible by Eddie Vernon, a 12-year-old boy who claimed to have witnessed the slaying.

No physical evidence tied any of the three to the crime and each had witnesses who said they were elsewhere when it happened. They had no criminal records.

Still, all three of them were convicted at trial and sentenced to death.

Ajamu was scheduled to be executed on Oct. 28, 1977, but was granted a stay.

Then, he benefited from a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1978 that deemed Ohio's death penalty system unconstitutional. His death sentence was commuted to life in prison with possible parole after 15 years. His brother and Jackson also were taken off death row.

Ajamu eventually became the clerk of education at two prisons, helping thousands of men get their GEDs and college degrees. He got his GED when he was 34.

Ajamu realized he wanted to be someone who succeeded. He decided on a new goal – pushing to end the death penalty.

'As you walk the streets in life and you run into evil, stop it,' Ajamu said. 'If you can't stop it, speak against it. If you can't speak against it, do like I did when I was 18 years old in that cell on death row – hate that evil deep in your heart until you can do both.'

Ajamu lost his first bid for parole in 1990 and his second in 1995, when he was told he wouldn't be eligible again for 10 years. However, he later learned that the parole authority allowed those who had received a 'super flop' of 10 years or more to request reconsideration. The authority agreed he qualified, and Ajamu was paroled in 2003 after serving 28 years in prison.

After Ajamu was released, he met his wife, LaShawn, when he gave her directions on a bus in Cleveland. He told her his life story, and she told him about how she'd lost her brother in a road-rage incident in Canton in 1997. She and her family wanted justice for her brother but didn't want to seek the death penalty.

'That gave us another special bond,' Ajamu said.

The couple got married in 2004.

The Innocence Project became involved in the three men's cases and, in 2014, Bridgeman and Jackson won the right to new trials. This was after Eddie Vernon, the alleged witness, said in a court hearing that he lied when he claimed he saw the killing. Vernon said he had been pressured by detectives, who threatened to charge his parents with perjury if he recanted his story.

Prosecutors dropped the charges against all three men. They were declared innocent by a judge in 2015, and won settlements for their wrongful imprisonments that totaled \$18million. Jackson spent 39 years behind bars, which was, at the time, the longest time an exonerated person had been incarcerated. Bridgeman served nearly as long as Jackson.

No one else has been charged in Harold Franks' slaying. Ajamu said he met one of Franks' relatives at an event who told him, 'No one in the family believed you guys did it.'

Ajamu and his brother Wiley bought the house where he now lives in Richfield in 2015. Wiley died in 2021 following a lengthy struggle with cystic fibrosis.

Ajamu is the last person in his immediate family still living. He lost his mother, father, sister and two brothers, with all of them but Wiley dying before or while he was in prison.

'I can't make this up,' he said, crying. 'This is human life. This is what I've experienced.'

Ajamu also has found satisfaction in his efforts with Witness to Innocence, which is made up of death penalty exonerees from many states, including Tennessee, Florida and Texas. He has spoken all over the

world, including London, and served as the board chairman until April.

Ajamu recently spoke to a group of attorneys at a Summit County Legal Defenders event in Akron, organized by training director Abigail Schock. She said his powerful story moved the audience – many of whom, like Ajamu himself, were in tears by the end.

'I want the interns to know that they're becoming lawyers and – with that – comes an immense responsibility,' she said. 'Someone's life is in your hands.'

Ajamu said he'll continue his fight against the death penalty as long as he's able.

'With my time left, I will make sure not to sit back and be complacent,' he said. 'The worst thing you can do in life is to be complacent. I was given the chance to live.'

A photo of Kwame Ajamu and his co-defendants with an award they received in 2016 after their exonerations. Lisa Scalfaro/Akron Beacon Journal