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Inside and outside artists working for transformative change
in the Criminal Justice System

Charles Lawson Profile of a Wrongly Convicted Artist

Charles Lawson is an acclaimed visual artist and co-founder of Art for Justice. Since 1997 his thought provoking art has been featured in over 40 exhibits in the Philadelphia area. Charles Lawson has used his art to stimulate a dialogue about violence, crime and incarceration and to work for transformative change in our communities and in the Criminal Justice System.

90% of Wrongful Convictions Cannot be Addressed with DNA Evidence

Art for Justice is bringing public awareness to wrongly convicted individuals whose cases cannot be addressed with DNA evidence. The Innocence Project estimates that 90% of those wrongly convicted, because their convictions are related to flaws such as coerced confessions, faulty witness testimony and ineffective legal counsel, cannot be assisted with DNA testing.

Mr. Lawson's is one of those cases. Sentenced to life without parole due to a myriad of flaws in the Criminal Justice System, he has experienced a **coerced confession as a juvenile, poor legal counsel to plea bargain to a crime he did not commit, and mandatory sentencing laws that require he spend the rest of his life in prison**. While not claiming actual innocence to a third degree conviction for a later crime he said occurred in self defense, Mr. Lawson is arguing against serving a sentence of life without parole.

Charles Lawson's Coerced Confession

In 1974 17 year old Charles Lawson was handcuffed to a chair and beaten by police. As a result he gave a coerced confession which led to a First Degree Murder conviction. Charles was a juvenile when the coerced confession took place. No parent or legal representative was present during the interrogation. Charles spent four years in prison, appealed the conviction and was granted a new trial. He was then given poor legal counsel to plea bargain to Voluntary Manslaughter with a sentence of 5-15 years (for a crime he did not commit) and agreement of immediate release from prison. Lacking the resources for quality legal services that a new trial would require, Charles Lawson accepted the plea bargain. He later found that while he had plea bargained to Voluntary Manslaughter, written on the record was Third Degree Murder.

Mandatory Sentencing Laws

In 1982 the Pennsylvania Legislature enacted Mandatory Sentencing Laws that required that any person found guilty of a Murder Charge would automatically be sentenced to life imprisonment without parole if that person has a prior murder charge of any kind. In 1990, after a clear and direct threat was made on his life, Charles Lawson's shot and killed a man. All witnesses testified that the threat had been made. In this case, Charles Lawson was convicted of Third Degree Murder.

Charles Lawson Sentenced to Life without Parole

Because of the previous coerced confession as a juvenile, the Ill Advised Plea Bargain to a crime he did not commit, the subsequent conviction to Third Degree Murder and the Mandatory Sentencing, Charles Lawson is serving a sentence of life without parole. His legal appeals have been unsuccessful.

Charles Lawson's Life's Work

In addition to contributing art to over 40 exhibits in the Philadelphia area he has done the following:

- Recipient of the Philadelphia Watercolor Society's Winsor Newton Award in 2002 for his painting, *I Survive*.
- Co-creator of the Road Map for Life Workshops, crime prevention program for high risk youth. All proceeds from limited edition prints of Mr. Lawson's artworks benefit the Workshops.
- Created the first mural in the School Room at Graterford Prison in 2002.
- Designed the Mural in the Outdoor Visiting area at Graterford Prison.
- Featured Artist in Afro-Centric Magazine, 2007.
- Speaker at the National Conference of Arts & Corrections, Graterford Prison, 2008.
- Donated artworks to raise funds for the following: Need and Deed, Mural Arts Program of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Prison Society.
- Created a 4 x 8 painting honoring Dr. McKenna of Villanova. The painting, which is installed in the Connelly Student Center, will be dedicated on October 28, 2009.

Concrete, Steel and Paint

Charles Lawson is seen by inside and outside artists as a spokesman for art and social justice. In the documentary film, *Concrete, Steel and Paint*, producers Tony Herzia and Cindy Berstein chose Charles Lawson to join with other voices as common ground was sought in the creation of a Mural Arts Project. *Concrete, Steel and Paint* highlights the Director of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, Jane Golden's efforts to bring together offenders and victims in the creation of a mural. The mission of the film is to encourage dialogue throughout our communities about violence, crime and incarceration. It furthers the discussion to know the story of Charles Lawson's wrongful conviction, which he does not mention in the film, but underlies his words, deepening the compassion he displays for victims and offenders.

One Man among Many: What You Can Do!

240 wrongly convicted individuals have been exonerated with the help of DNA evidence. Charles Lawson's case is but one example of a man wrongly sentenced due to flaws in the Criminal Justice System which DNA evidence cannot address. We ask that you join Art for Justice in bringing public awareness to the injustice of Mr. Lawson's incarceration and the injustice of other wrongly incarcerated individuals.

Join us in writing to our Pennsylvania Legislators to seek solutions for Wrongly Convicted Individuals. We are seeking solutions for Charles Lawson and for others denied justice.

Art for Justice supports and exhibits inmate art to promote dialogue on ways to prevent crime, reduce levels of incarceration, and improve the Criminal Justice System.