

Woman gets \$7.5 million for wrongful conviction  
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It took 16 years for Ellen Reasonover's pleas of innocence to be heard. A federal judge released her from prison in 1999, overturning a murder conviction.

It took five more years for Reasonover's pleas for compensation for wrongful conviction to be heard. The insurance company for Dellwood, the town where the killing took place, has now agreed to pay her \$7.5 million in an out-of-court settlement.

As part of the settlement, neither of the defendants, the town or its police chief, Dan Chapman, admits any wrongdoing in the case. Chapman was the Major Case Squad's lead investigator when a gas station attendant was shot to death in a holdup 21 years ago.

Reasonover was not available for comment Wednesday. Neither was Chapman.

Two of the lawyers negotiating the settlement were veterans of the O.J. Simpson murder trial defense, Johnnie Cochran and Barry Scheck, working with lawyers Richard Sindel of Clayton and Cheryl Pilate and Charles Rogers of Kansas City.

Reasonover's troubles began in January 1983 as a witness reporting what she claimed she had seen about the murder of 19-year-old attendant James Buckley at a Vickers station on West Florissant Avenue in Dellwood.

She ended up the primary suspect in the case, was later convicted of capital murder, and was sentenced to life in prison without parole for 50 years.

From the beginning, Reasonover insisted she was innocent. Her failure to testify at her trial was the recommendation of her trial attorneys and a mistake, she said in later interviews.

In August 1999, U.S. District Judge Jean Hamilton ruled that the trial Reasonover got in St. Louis County Circuit Court was "fundamentally unfair." The judge went further. She said there was compelling evidence that jurors would have agreed with her assertions of innocence if they had heard the evidence.

Hamilton's ruling was based in part on a 58-minute tape, a secretly recorded Dellwood jailhouse conversation between Reasonover and her boyfriend, Stanley White, in which 20 times they deny being involved in the murder.

Reasonover was placed in another jail cell where two hours later she supposedly confessed the shooting to a cellmate, Rose Jolliff, who later told the jury about the alleged confession. A future cellmate, Mary Lyner, also claimed Reasonover had confessed.

Later, new evidence would prove that Lyner had lied to the jury about her dealings with prosecutors. And questions arose about the deal Jolliff got for her testimony.

References to the secret tape surfaced in appeals in 1984 and 1985. The tape was then forgotten until Paul Henderson, an investigator, heard about it 10 years later. Attorneys Pilate and Sindel asked for it, and prosecutors found it.

As a reporter in Seattle in 1982, Henderson had won a Pulitzer Prize for stories that eventually freed a salesman of a rape conviction. Working for Centurion Ministries, a nonprofit group that took up Reasonover's cause, Henderson interviewed 94 people in 1993 and 1994 about the murder. One of them had heard the tape at the Dellwood police station.

Other defendants in Reasonover's civil suit, filed in 2001, were St. Louis County and prosecutor Steven H. Goldman, now a county judge, along with some other police officers. Goldman declined to comment Wednesday.

Last year, U.S. District Judge Carol Jackson dismissed the claims against Goldman, St. Louis County and the other officers, leaving Dellwood and Chapman as the only defendants.

Goldman's attorneys had argued that a prosecutor is immune from claims arising from the performance of his duties. Jackson cited legal precedents and wrote: "A prosecutor is entitled to absolute immunity against allegations that he withheld or suppressed favorable evidence."

Reasonover's attorneys are appealing Jackson's ruling to the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and hope to get the remainder of the case reinstated, Sindel said Wednesday.