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Wrongfully Convicted Man Sues Philadelphia, Ex-Prosecutors and Police Over 'Sex for Lies' Scheme

Willie Stokes, 60—the state's longest incarcerated exoneree—was released from the Chester State Correctional Institution on Jan. 4 after serving 37 years for the 1980 murder of Leslie Campbell, which he did not commit, said his attorneys Joshua Van Naarden and Julia Ronnebaum of Van Naarden Spizer Chase and Pinto.

By Allison Dunn | January 27, 2022



Joshua Van Naarden and Willie Stokes

A Pennsylvania man who spent nearly four decades behind bars for a murder he didn't commit filed a civil lawsuit ([//images.law.com/contrib/content/uploads/documents/402/99620/Stokes-Complaint-1-27-22-TS.pdf](https://images.law.com/contrib/content/uploads/documents/402/99620/Stokes-Complaint-1-27-22-TS.pdf)) Thursday against the city of Philadelphia, as well as against several former prosecutors and police detectives, for allegedly conspiring in a "sex for lies" scheme to wrongly convict him.

Willie Stokes, 60—the state's longest incarcerated exoneree—was released from the Chester State Correctional Institution on Jan. 4 after serving 37 years for the 1980 murder of Leslie Campbell, which he did not commit, said his attorneys Joshua Van Naarden and Julia Ronnebaum of Van Naarden Spizer Chase and Pinto.

Stokes' conviction was overturned Dec. 30 by Judge Timothy Savage.

Now, Stokes has filed a 51-page lawsuit against the city of Philadelphia; Robert J. Marano and John DiDonato, then-prosecutors with the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office; as well as the estates of two former police detectives, Ernest Gilbert and Lawrence Gerrard, who are both dead.

"In a shocking 'sex for lies' scheme to boost conviction rates and clear out cold cases, detectives with the Philadelphia Police Department, including Detectives Ernest Gilbert and Lawrence Gerrard, offered jailhouse informants the ultimate incentives—sex, drugs, and a reduced sentence—in exchange for adopting false and fabricated statements which were used to frame, arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate multiple innocent men, including Willie Stokes," alleged the complaint, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania on Thursday.

Stokes seeks compensatory and punitive damages in the seven-count complaint alleging that the defendants violated his civil rights, maliciously prosecuted him, and deprived his liberty without due process.

Detectives Gilbert and Gerrard allegedly made their case against Stokes by offering an informant "irresistible incentives," in exchange for their fabricated statements and false testimony in a push to "clear the books" on unsolved homicide cases, the complaint alleged.

A witness, Franklin Lee, was promised and provided sex and drugs in exchange for his false testimony. During a preliminary hearing in May 1984, Lee testified that Stokes admitted to killing Campbell and bragged that he was getting away with the murder, according to the complaint.

However, when Lee took the stand at trial, he recanted his prior inculpatory statement, stating that "the police made me make this statement," according to the complaint.

DiDonato—who now serves as a senior trial lawyer at Brookman, Rosenberg, Brown & Sandler—urged the jury to reject Lee's trial testimony and accept his testimony from the preliminary hearing, according to the complaint. Stokes was later found guilty and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

DiDonato and Marano—the latter now of Veritext Deposition Services, according to Philadelphia Bar Association records—are alleged to have knowingly used the false testimony of Lee to convict Stokes, but then charged and convicted Lee for perjury after Stokes' conviction, according to the complaint.

"The prosecutors never told Willie Stokes or his attorneys that they had prosecuted Lee for perjury for the same statements used to convict Mr. Stokes," the complaint alleged. "It was not until 2015—after Mr. Stokes had wasted 31 years of life behind bars—that Mr. Stokes first learned of Lee's perjury conviction through the prison grapevine."

The complaint identified 20 other defendants who had their convictions later exonerated, which shows "the pervasive patterns, practices and customs of official misconduct" within the police department's homicide unit.

"These unconstitutional and egregious policies, practices and customs have persisted for a significant period of time, which continued through this investigation, and for years thereafter, demonstrates the deliberate indifference of the defendant city to practices or outrageous police misconduct, including, but not limited to, coercion of witnesses, witness intimidation, the suppression of exculpatory evidence and a pervasive abuse of authority and power," the complaint said.

Spokespersons for the Police Department and the city both declined to comment on the pending litigation. Messages seeking comment from DiDonato and Marano were not immediately returned.

The case has been assigned to Judge Nitza I. Quiñones Alejandro.