A criminologist's background

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But it has a down side. Such work is exhausting on a number of levels. Shabaka Brown used to fight against the death penalty but does not do it anymore. “I think it tires them out,” Westervelt says.

Compensation

“I have a 4-year-old now. It’s important that I choose to do something for research that is valuable enough in my mind, something worthy of being away. I want to do something to make this a better place.” — Saundra Westervelt

Hearing all of these stories does not come without personal reactions. Westervelt is a researcher, but she’s also a mother and a person who cares deeply about what happens to these wronged people.

Ultimately, she wants this research to help those who work with exonerees and inform those who have an opportunity to change things for them.

“Most consider the exoneration to be the victory. But it’s not a victory if we revictimize the person when they get out.”

In some states, compensation is offered to the exoneree, but not in every state.

“We would argue stringently it’s a good thing but it’s not the end-all thing,” she says.

For one, most don’t know how to manage money. Kirk Bloodsworth received $300,000 and it quickly dwindled away.

“They are not very adept at social interaction, and people come out of the woodwork and want money,” says Westervelt. “It can’t be thought of as the only solution.”

She believes the system has a continuing obligation to help these people as they readjust to life. But before the system fulfills these needs, it must be aware of what the needs are.

“It’s not enough to say, ‘You’re out now.’ We have an obligation to them. As a society, we owe them a debt.”

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Ariminologists

Saundra Davis Westervelt ’90 planned to be an English major at Furman — until, needing an elective one term her freshman year, she chose to enroll in an introductory criminology course.

Taught by Paul Kooistra ’74, the class fascinated Westervelt and introduced her to a new world of study. “After all, no one takes criminology in high school,” she says.

She began signing up for every criminology-related course Furman offered and went on to earn a double major in English and sociology. She also spent a summer conducting research with Kooistra. After graduating she headed to the University of Virginia, where Kooistra also studied, and completed her Ph.D. in sociology.

Since joining the faculty at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro in 1997, she has completed two well-received books, both published by Rutgers University Press. Shifting the Blame: How Victimization Became a Criminal Defense came out in 1998, and in 2001 she and UNCG colleague John A. Humphrey co-edited Wrongly Convicted: Perspectives on Failed Justice.

Her current research on former death row inmates is likely to produce another book. For this project, Westervelt and colleague Kimberly Cook started with a list of exonerees provided by the Death Penalty Information Center. All 110 people on the initial list had faced execution dates (the list now numbers 123).

Although many of the former prisoners could not be traced, Westervelt and Cook worked through intermediaries (attorneys, other researchers) to locate as many as they could. They then sent letters explaining their interest and requesting interviews. Some were willing to talk; others declined. To date, Westervelt and Cook have completed 17 face-to-face interviews and an 18th by mail.

Westervelt says, “We hope to draw some conclusions about the similarities and differences in these people’s experiences. How do they cope with this stigma they’re forced to live with? How do they manage their new identity? What are their survival mechanisms?”

The conversations can be draining, for both interviewers and exonerees. And, as Westervelt points out, even though they have been exonerated, most of her subjects still face a bumpy road.

“In these cases, there aren’t many happy endings,” she says.

— Jim Stewart

Photo by Chris English, UNC-Greensboro