

Patience, Resolve Fueled Man on His Long Road to Freedom; Wrongly convicted of murder, Harold Hall was determined to prove his innocence. His quest took 19 years behind bars.

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Harold Hall always believed his freedom would come. He just did not realize he would spend nearly two decades behind bars before it did.

"I've learned that you've got to have patience, and you've got to be determined," Hall, 37, said. "It's just been a long, long ride.... It's been an experience, one that I would not wish on anyone."

Hall, wrongfully convicted of a 1985 double murder, walked free this week after Los Angeles County prosecutors decided not to retry him. The U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals granted Hall a new trial last year after ruling that his rights were denied because police and prosecutors relied on a dubious confession and a questionable jailhouse informant.

Hall is the second state prison inmate from Los Angeles County in four months to be released in part because the conviction was based on unreliable testimony from informants. Both convictions dated from the time of a scandal in the late 1980s when prosecutors acknowledged that several informants had fabricated confessions from other inmates in exchange for favors from law enforcement.

In April, a judge freed Thomas Lee Goldstein, who had been wrongfully imprisoned for 24 years. Goldstein had been convicted of murder based on testimony from an informant and an eyewitness who later recanted.

On Wednesday, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge William Pounders freed Hall after the district attorney's office announced it could not move forward with the case and asked for a dismissal.

"Various reasons, including the passage of time and the unavailability of a potential witness, forced us to make this request," the district attorney's office said in a prepared statement.

Pounders said he was not surprised by the prosecutors' decision.

"After such a long period of time, the evidence is old," he said Friday in an interview. "It is no longer fresh and persuasive. That, along with the problems pointed out by the 9th Circuit, made it likely that something like this would happen."

The federal judges ruled that there was no physical or forensic evidence connecting Hall to the slaying. The court noted that the jailhouse informant, Cornelius Lee, admitted fabricating notes about Hall's alleged involvement in the death.

"The only other evidence of Hall's guilt was his curious and largely uncorroborated confession, which was shown to contain multiple inconsistencies and inaccuracies," the decision read.

Hall said he signed a confession after an excruciating 17-hour interrogation. "The detectives forced me into making this confession," he said.

Defense attorney William J. Genego said he credits Hall with keeping his case alive for so many years in the face of a sentence of life without parole in prison. "Harold is an extraordinary individual," he said. "He had the wherewithal to continue on. It took a long, long time."

Hall was 18 and a high school dropout living with his mother in South Los Angeles when he was charged with the capital murders of Nola Duncan and her brother, David Rainey. A jury convicted him of double murder, but decided against the death penalty after Hall took the stand to declare his innocence.

An appellate court later overturned the conviction in the killing of Rainey, citing insufficient evidence. Hall has been fighting the other conviction ever since, and he said he never lost his determination to prove his innocence and to get out of prison. The original trial judge granted him a retrial, but that decision was reversed by the state Court of Appeal.

"I just had to stay focused to prove my case," he said. "I knew it was gonna come. It was just a matter of time."

While behind bars, he worked on his case nonstop, viewing it as his mission. He did not socialize. He said he did not spend time in the prison yard. He got a job in the law library. He researched, filed motions and called anyone he could think of -- reporters, politicians, lawyers -- for help.

There were many hurdles. Whenever the prison was locked down for security, he could not go to the library. He did not have a computer, and he had trouble getting transcripts from his trial. Part of the time he was not represented by an attorney.

During the 19 years, Hall refused to accept his sentence. He stayed in touch with the world outside. He called his mother and sisters often, kept up with the newest technology and clothing styles and watched television news every morning.

When he was released Wednesday, Hall said he felt overwhelming relief. He is staying with his mother, who he said is "overjoyed" to have him home.

Hall has a long list of places he wants to go, including Disney Hall and SeaWorld. But most of all, he just wants to enjoy a normal life, without the prison regimen that governed when he slept and ate, and without having to always watch his back.

Hall said spending more than half his life behind bars in places such as Corcoran and Folsom state prisons has taught him to appreciate life and not to take anything for granted -- even sitting in traffic.

Hall, a lanky man with a neatly trimmed mustache, said he had forgotten some things, like that a pedestrian must push a button to get the "Walk" sign to flash at street crossings.

He earned his high-school equivalency diploma, or GED, while in prison and plans to study to be a computer programmer. He also hopes to write a book about his experience. He is considering filing a civil suit against the Los Angeles Police Department and the city of Los Angeles, alleging that the justice system failed him.

"What they took from me, I can't get back," he said. "The thing is to move forward, to enjoy what I have now."

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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