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RANDY STEIDL WON HIS FREEDOM two years ago when he was released from Danville Correctional Center after a federal judge vacated his 1987 double murder conviction.

But as Steidl has learned in the time since then, there is a long distance between freedom from prison and true freedom. While his conviction was deemed wrongful by a judge, it remains a glaring black mark on his record, a nearly insurmountable obstacle as he tries to find employment and lead a normal life.

With prosecutors having ruled out a second trial due to lack of evidence, Steidl lives in a state of legal limbo: not exactly convicted of murder, but not acquitted. That will be Steidl's status permanently unless Gov. Rod Blagojevich grants him a pardon.

We think it is time that the governor does so.

STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER reporter Sarah Antonacci caught up with Steidl last week in Springfield, Mo., where he has a job with a container corporation. He got that job, he explained, because he showed the company a collection of published news articles about his ordeal. He lives in fear of losing that job because his past job searches have been futile.

"I feel there would be better job opportunities had I not had this conviction on my record," Steidl said. "You try to explain that you were wrongfully convicted and that you're innocent and people say, 'Then why weren't you acquitted?'"

That is a question that we and many other people have been asking ever since the details of Steidl's trial came to light.

Steidl was convicted in 1987 of the July 1986 murders of Dyke and Karen Rhoads in Paris. Firefighters found the Rhoadses stabbed to death when they responded to an early-morning fire at the couple's home. Herb Whitlock also was charged in the killings and, in a separate trial, was found guilty in Karen Rhoads' death. He remains in prison, though efforts are under way to free him as well.

THE TWO MAIN WITNESSES in Steidl's trial both recanted their testimony within two years of his conviction. One of those witnesses gave police three separate descriptions of the events on the night of the murder, and the prosecution used a combination of those stories in its case.

No physical evidence placed Steidl or Whitlock at the scene of the crime, and a woman who spent the night of the murders with Steidl testified on his behalf. Steidl had complained about poor representation by his lawyer, and the judge who later vacated his conviction agreed that he had not been properly represented.

Sentenced to death (because of poor legal representation, a judge later ruled), Steidl steadily worked the appeals process hoping that eventually his story would be heard. In 1991, his case was assigned to Springfield attorney Michael Metnick. Metnick, investigator Bill Clutter and attorneys Kathy Saltmarsh, John Hanlon and Peter Rotskoff found shocking evidence about Steidl's trial. Eventually, Northwestern University's Center on Wrongful Convictions joined Steidl's cause, which soon became a national news story.

NOW, EVEN AN INVESTIGATION of the investigation of the Steidl case has generated controversy, as a state police investigator received a \$360,000 civil rights settlement after he claimed his superiors had, for political reasons, thwarted his effort to find the truth.

This is an ugly case about which we may never know the truth (though we hope the ongoing state police investigation succeeds). We do know that, according to U.S. Judge Michael McCuskey, "acquittal was reasonably probable if the jury had heard all the evidence." With no new trial planned (or warranted), Steidl will not get his shot at acquittal.

A pardon will make Steidl not just free from prison, but free to pursue life.