

Northwestern

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MICHIGAN JUDGE ORDERS RELEASE OF DAVONTAE SANFORD

Northwestern, University of Michigan legal teams filed motion for relief from judgment

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- Davontae Sanford convicted as teen in Detroit murders
 - Wayne County prosecutor has agreed to dismiss all charges
 - Sanford has served nearly nine years in prison
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DETROIT --- Wayne County Judge Brian Sullivan today ordered the immediate release of Davontae Sanford, who has been wrongly imprisoned since age 14 for a quadruple homicide that occurred on Detroit's Runyon Street. Since 2008, professional hitman Vincent Smothers has repeatedly insisted that he alone was responsible for the murders. Now 23 years old, Davontae will be released from custody imminently after serving nearly nine years of a 37- to 90-year sentence.

Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy also has agreed to dismiss all charges and not to re-try Sanford for these crimes. Worthy based her decision on a lengthy report by the Michigan State Police detailing that agency's yearlong reinvestigation of the Runyon Street quadruple homicide, completed on May 20, 2016. Specifically, that report alleges that former Detroit Police Deputy Chief James Tolbert committed perjury when he falsely testified that Davontae Sanford drew a diagram of the crime scene in its entirety, including the location of the victims' bodies, during his interrogation by police.

The Northwestern Pritzker School of Law's Center on Wrongful Convictions of Youth and the Michigan Innocence Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School filed the motion for relief from judgment that Judge Sullivan granted today.

Pro bono attorneys from Dykema Gossett PLLC handled the final negotiations with the prosecutor's office leading to today's stipulated order. The Northwestern team was headed by Megan Crane and supported by Steven Drizin and Laura

Nirider, and the Michigan team was headed by Dave Moran. Valerie Newman from the State Appellate Defender Office, which formerly represented Sanford on appeal, also served on the legal team.

In April 2015, the Michigan Innocence Clinic and Northwestern's Center on Wrongful Convictions of Youth filed an extensive Motion for Relief from Judgment highlighting the detailed, corroborated confession by Smothers to the Runyon Street murders and highlighting the obvious unreliability of Davontae Sanford's confessions, given their complete lack of corroboration and many inaccuracies. As a result, the Michigan State Police reinvestigated the murders. On May 20, 2016, the Michigan State Police provided the report to the Wayne County Prosecutor's office.

"After 3,185 days of prison time for a crime he did not commit, Davontae finally got justice today," said Megan Crane, co-director of the Center on Wrongful Convictions of Youth at Northwestern. "Davontae and his family, and many lawyers, have fought long and hard to show the truth in this case. We could not be happier that this day is finally here.

"In particular, we want to applaud the Michigan State Police (MSP) for their truly extraordinary reinvestigation of the Runyon Street murders and Davontae Sanford's innocence. The evidence underlying Judge Sullivan and Kym Worthy's decision today was uncovered by the MSP and they deserve immense credit," Crane said.

"We are pleased that Davontae Sanford finally will have this injustice corrected, albeit nine years too late," said David Moran, director of the Michigan Innocence Clinic. "This has been an extraordinary case in which the guilty party took responsibility, but the justice system took many years to acknowledge the complete breakdown that allowed for Davontae to sit in prison for nine years. Davontae can now return to his family and, for the first time in his adult life, live as a free man."

Crane added: "This case highlights the critical need for juveniles to be represented by counsel in the interrogation room. Here, 14-year-old Davontae confessed to a crime he did not commit only after he had been interrogated repeatedly over the course of two days without an attorney, or even a parent, present. His confession made little sense and got more wrong than right. If an attorney had been by Davontae's side while police were questioning him, he would never have falsely confessed and this injustice would never have happened."

Case Background

At age 15, Davontae Sanford was convicted of fatally shooting four people at a house on Runyon Street in Detroit in 2007. He confessed after several hours of police interrogation over the course of two days. He subsequently entered a

guilty plea in the middle of trial, once he realized his defense attorney was not going to do anything to defend him.

Two weeks and two days after Sanford was sentenced to 37 to 90 years in prison, Vincent Smothers, an admitted professional hitman now serving time for eight murders, told Detroit police offices that he and an adult accomplice — not Sanford — were responsible for the four homicides on Runyon Street. He admitted his role in 2008 while voluntarily confessing to a string of other killings and he has detailed his role in the shootings during numerous interviews with police, attorneys, and journalists since then.

Smothers has been convicted of all of the other murders to which he confessed but not the Runyon Street killings, even though Smothers led the police to one of the murder weapons used in the Runyon killings. The second murder weapon also has been linked to one of Smothers' other hit murders, for which he is serving time. Furthermore, Smothers used a gun he stole from the Runyon house to kill a police officer's wife in late 2007.

Read more about the case [here](#).

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