



Clyde Charles

Year of incident: 1981
Conviction: Aggravated rape
Sentence: Life
Year of conviction: 1982
Year of exoneration: 1999
Sentence served: 17 years

On March 12, 1981, a 26-year-old white female nurse was walking along a road near Houma, La., looking for help after her car broke down when she was accosted and raped by a black man. He grabbed her by the neck and dragged her from the road to the side of some buildings. He punched her in the face, bit her, and ordered her to take off her pants, stockings, and underwear. He raped her and repeatedly choked her and hit her head with a pipe. After the rape, she ran away and was picked up by a police officer, who took her to Terrebonne General Hospital and then went to look for the perpetrator.

At the time, Clyde Charles, a black 27-year-old shrimp fisherman, was leaving a bar in Houma, La., where he had been with his brother Marlo. The police officer spotted Clyde, whom he had seen hitchhiking just an hour before the rape and had ordered off the road. He picked up Clyde and brought him to the hospital where the victim identified him as her assailant.

Clyde was tried by an all-white jury of 10 women and two men. The prosecution's evidence included the victim's identification and her testimony that the rapist called himself "Clyde." A criminalist testified that two Caucasian hairs on Clyde's shirt were microscopically similar (but not conclusively identical) to hair from the victim's head. The police officer testified that Clyde had been wearing a dark jogging jacket with white stripes when he saw him outside the bar, corroborating the victim's description of her assailant's dark jogging suit with stripes. The officer also testified that Clyde had been wearing a red cap and blue jacket tied around his neck when he saw him hitchhiking. A red baseball hat and blue jean jacket were found near the scene of the rape.

On June 22, 1982, the jury found Clyde guilty of aggravated rape. He was sentenced to life in prison at Louisiana's state penitentiary at Angola.

» Watch the Video

HIGH LOW

DNA finally proved Clyde's innocence, and on the day of his release, everyone was there cheering. But then when the cameras went away, everybody went away.

» In His Own Words

Charles talks about finding a measure of "comfort" in prison despite the violence and turmoil.

» "The Case for Innocence"

In 2000, FRONTLINE profiled Charles and other individuals who had been exonerated by DNA evidence. Read Charles' interview, along with a chronology of his case.

Clyde appealed his case twice, in 1982 and 1987, and lost. Then in 1990, when he learned about DNA evidence, he and his sisters Lois Hill and Rochelle Abrams began writing letters requesting a test of the evidence in his case. For years, their requests were ignored, blocked, or denied by state and federal officials. Charles and his family kept writing, however, and eventually [The Innocence Project](#) took his case.



Charles celebrating his release.

The state, under tremendous pressure from The Innocence Project and with media attention from FRONTLINE, finally granted Clyde post-conviction DNA testing in May 1999. The results of the test eliminated him as the perpetrator of the crime, and he was released on Dec. 17, 1999. Four months later, his brother Marlo was arrested after DNA tests implicated him in the rape of the nurse. (Marlo is now in Angola, the same prison where Clyde

spent nearly 18 years.)

After his release, Clyde lived in and out of his car on the Bayou in Houma, La., and became estranged from his family. He suffered from bouts of severe depression and diabetes, which went untreated, and spent his time with a group of drifter friends who moved from house to house.

As a condition of his release from state prison, Clyde signed a waiver in which he agreed not to seek damages for his wrongful imprisonment. In March 2000, however, he filed a federal lawsuit against the prosecutors of Terrebonne Parish, claiming that they had blocked his access to DNA testing. In February 2003, with the help of State Sen. Cleo Fields, Terrebonne Parish offered Clyde a settlement: a meager \$200,000, \$70,000 of which will go to his lawyer. Before he received it, however, he was jailed for the stabbing of another one of his brothers during a dispute over Thanksgiving weekend 2002, and then sent to a clinic for psychiatric care.

Clyde has now completed his rehabilitation program and is back in Houma.

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