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She remembered the day she first saw him; he was sitting near her brother, Douglas James, in court. Something wasn't right. She quietly conferred with her mother.

"When they arrested Doug and we saw that boy, we said 'Well, who is he?'"

Daniels believes it was not Crotzer, but a longtime family friend of her brother's who was in the car that night with the James brothers. She and her sister, Sharon Watson, both say they saw their brother's childhood friend drive away in the Buick the night of the rapes.

"We knew from the beginning that boy (Crotzer) was not with them," she said.

Daniels knew it, her sisters knew it; her mother knew it; her brothers knew it and so did lots of people in their neighborhood. But when the mother tried to tell prosecutors she had never seen Crotzer before, and that their family friend was the one they should pursue, authorities didn't listen, Daniels said.

Six years later, her mother was dead from cancer and Crotzer was still in prison.

"My mother wanted the truth to come out. She died with a broken heart over that," Daniels said.

Two decades later, Daniels and her sisters are working with Crotzer's defense attorneys to free him. Still living in the neighborhood, the childhood friend has refused the sisters' appeals to come clean.

Daniels and her sisters are learning it takes a lot more than a broken heart to uncover the truth.

A second chance

It would be years before Crotzer's story resurfaced. When it did, it landed on a cluttered desk in New York in late 2002, 1,200 miles away from the Polk County prison where Crotzer was serving his sentence. With nothing but time on his hands, Crotzer laid out his case in a letter to the Innocence Project, the New York-based legal nonprofit that has successfully uncovered dozens of wrongful convictions. He said he had filed an appeal asking a court to review DNA evidence in his case shortly before Florida's then-deadline for consideration.

(Florida legislators are still debating whether there should be a deadline for DNA appeals.)

Crotzer's motion was denied, but his case caught the attention of Innocence Project

Publicity Spurred Crotzer's Release By Reluctant Officials

On February 4, 2004, Alan Crotzer's *pro bono* legal team filed a motion to set aside his 1982 rape and robbery conviction and vacate his sentence. The motion was based on the new evidence of DNA tests excluding him as the rapist, and the statement of one of his two co-defendants that Crotzer wasn't involved. The new evidence confirmed the truthfulness of multiple alibi witnesses who in vain testified at Crotzer's trial that he wasn't at the crime scene.

The Hillsborough County State Attorney's Office opposed Crotzer's motion, and the case languished for more than a year and a half due to legal maneuvering and retesting of evidence. Then on December 11, 2005, the *St. Petersburg Times* published a major front-page article detailing the case for Crotzer's innocence. The *Times* published several follow-up articles and other media in the St. Petersburg area also reported on the outrageous circumstances of Crotzer's

continued imprisonment. On January 13, 2006, the *Times* led off an editorial titled *Waiting For Justice* with, "How much more time is it going to take before Hillsborough County prosecutors are satisfied that Alan Crotzer is innocent and should have his convictions set aside?"

The *next day* Hillsborough State Attorney Mark Ober finally caved and agreed Crotzer should go free. A hearing was scheduled for January 23 on the state attorney's motion to vacate Crotzer's conviction and sentence. The spotlight of publicity on how the prosecutors were standing in the path of a provably innocent man's release from prison accomplished what almost two years of efforts by Crotzer's legal team had failed to accomplish in the courtroom.

Nine days later, on January 23, 2006, Crotzer was released after 24 years of wrongful imprisonment. It was two weeks shy of two years after his motion had been filed in February 2004, and twenty-nine months after the DNA tests first excluded Crotzer as the rapist.

volunteer Sam Roberts and attorney David Menschel, then a recent Yale University law graduate. Roberts began trying to track down any remaining evidence from Crotzer's decades-old trial. He asked around at the Hillsborough Sheriff's Office. No luck. There wasn't even much left of the trial files at the courthouse, Roberts said.

But then he struck gold: An official at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's crime lab in Tampa said she had found five slides of material taken from the rape victims more than 20 years earlier.

The two approached Hillsborough prosecutor Michael Sinacore about having an independent lab in Maryland perform a DNA test on the material to see if any semen present in the samples matched Crotzer's DNA or if the results would exclude him as a rapist.

Sinacore agreed. But the Maryland lab said the samples were too small to determine whether there was a DNA match. When the initial tests failed to produce meaningful results, Roberts and Menschel worried that DNA evidence wouldn't pan out. So they flew to Florida in May 2003 to ask Crotzer's co-defendants, Corlenzo and Douglas James, what they knew.

"Fairly early on we developed a sense that this case was different," Menschel said. "As soon as we began to scratch beneath the surface, the evidence of his innocence was

so overwhelming that Sam and I decided to pursue the case no matter what."

They visited Corlenzo James, 45, first. He said he knew why they were there. He admitted Crotzer was not with him and his brother the night of the rapes, but he refused to sign a statement to that effect, Roberts said.

"He knew something was up right from the beginning," Roberts said. "He would look away and laugh to himself."

Corlenzo wouldn't budge, but Douglas, 52, was different.

"We didn't even have a chance to ask the question before he started talking," Menschel said. "Douglas' story was that he did everything that he was accused and eventually convicted of that night. He said his brother Corlenzo was the shotgun-wielding double rapist and his childhood friend was the third man."

Armed with Douglas James' statement, the two returned to New York and asked Sinacore to allow them to have the evidence tested again. The slides were sent to a lab in England in August 2003 where highly sensitive tests were performed. But that test didn't yield complete results.

Meanwhile, Menschel and Roberts turned to one of Florida's most well-known death penalty lawyers for assistance. Martin Mc-

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