



Three critics in early Nicarico probe honored

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Rolando Cruz doesn't get many invitations to the governor's mansion.

But the former death row inmate made the five-hour drive from his home in Wisconsin to Springfield to honor three people whom he credits with helping to save his life.

He was there Monday as Edward Cisowski, Mary Brigid Hayes and John Sam were recognized for their roles by the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project at the University of Illinois Springfield in the investigation of the 1983 slaying of Jeanine Nicarico of Naperville.

Cisowski and Hayes accepted an inaugural Profiles in Courage Award during a ceremony at the governor's mansion. Sam was unable to attend.

"They stood and fought for true American justice," said Cruz, who attended with his three youngest children. "Words cannot express our gratitude and faith."

Decades ago, the three law enforcement officials fought against the prevailing sentiment that led to the wrongful convictions of Cruz and Alejandro Hernandez for the 10-year-old girl's murder.

Cruz spent more than a decade in prison, including time on death row, before his 1995 exoneration. Advances in DNA technology eventually helped prove another man - longtime imprisoned murderer Brian Dugan - abducted, raped and killed Jeanine. He was sentenced to the death penalty last year.

Cisowski, of Naperville, was a state police lieutenant in the mid-1980s when he was assigned to investigate the Dugan lead. Cisowski met with Dugan a half-dozen times. Dugan soon convinced him he alone committed the crime. Cisowski faced criticism from a DuPage County regime convinced then they prosecuted the right men.

"I'm very happy it's over and the right decision was made," Cisowski said. "The right man is behind bars, where he belongs, and the others who were innocent are free."

Sam was a DuPage County sheriff's detective who interviewed Cruz and Hernandez and believed they were innocent. In fall 1984, after the men were indicted, Sam quit in protest when told to stay out of the Nicarico investigation.

Hayes, formerly Mary Brigid Kenney, made a similar public stand. Her first assignment as an Illinois assistant attorney general was to defend Cruz's conviction and death sentence on appeal. After citing numerous errors in the investigation, she urged then-Illinois Attorney General Roland Burris to reconsider the office's position. He refused and removed her from the case, prompting her March 1992 resignation.

"They had the courage to stand up against the prevailing winds and authorities to pursue what they believed to be the truth and justice," Downstate Illinois Innocence Project Director Larry Golden said. "I can't think of more deserving people."