

Something right happens for the "Wrong Man"

by Dusty Rhodes

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TWENTY-TWO YEARS IN PRISON is a long time, but a single weekend could be even longer when you're waiting to see whether Governor George Ryan might pardon you on his way out the office door. Keith Harris, who appeared on our October 3 cover under the headline "The Wrong Man," spent the past weekend "just keeping the faith," hoping that Ryan might wash away all records of the crime Harris did not commit.

Harris, from East St. Louis, was convicted of attempted murder for a 1978 incident in which a service station employee was robbed and shot seven times. His conviction was based solely on the victim's eyewitness identification; no physical evidence linked him to the crime. In fact, the crime turned out to be part of a longer string of similar armed robberies, all of which were later confessed to by two other men, who led police to stolen property taken in the robberies and guns used to commit the crimes.

Still, Harris was kept in prison. He finally got out a year and a half ago, but he still wanted to clear his name.



the news: The governor had issued a full pardon based on innocence. Harris's record will be completely expunged. "We were on the phone for less than a minute," Smith says. "Keith was so excited, he was calling everybody."

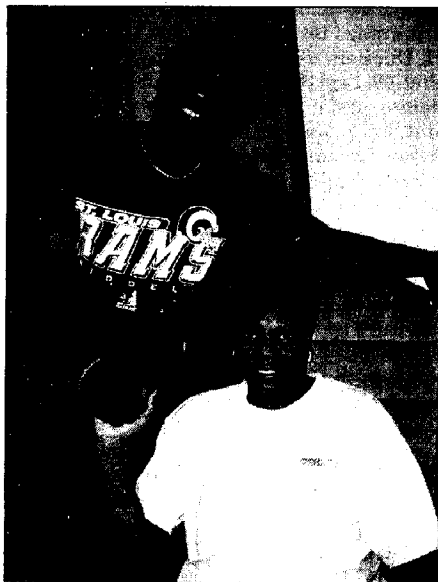
Nancy Ford says Harris had two other callers on hold when she talked to him on Tuesday. By the time *Illinois Times* reached Harris on Wednesday, things had settled down somewhat—he only had one other person on the line.

"I am so happy, I'm on top of the world. I haven't slept in a while. It's been up and down, like a punching bag. But it's good," Harris says. "Those students, they worked hours and hours for me. Even after they graduated, they continued to work on my case."

Larry Golden says he felt all along that Harris would receive a pardon. "It was really clear the governor really wanted to keep the focus on the death penalty, but I told Nancy: Watch for some kind of quiet action at the end," Golden says. "It's really important because Keith's case is a non-death-penalty case, but it illustrates the same inadequacies of the criminal justice process that are addressed in the suggested reforms—witness mis-identification, overzealous prosecution, legal representation, line-ups. That's what's so important about Keith's case: It shows that those problems are in other cases as well."

Harris's fight to clear his name has been aided, ironically, by former Illinois State Police investigator Alva Busch. "I've been looking at this case since 1978. Twenty-four years! But who's counting?" Busch jokes.

Busch, who didn't meet Harris until recently, would like to get some justice dealt to his former colleagues who put Harris in prison. "It wasn't elves that sent him there," Busch says. "I can understand how mistakes were made. But when it reaches the point where enough evidence comes forward to raise doubt, then shame on them if they don't pursue the truth. That's how innocent people get put in prison." ♦



Keith Harris with wife, Mary

After no word came on Monday, the local college students who had worked to help Harris were beginning to fear that he might not get the pardon they felt he deserved. Harris's case was the first undertaken by the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project, a group of UIS students under the leadership of professors Nancy Ford and Larry Golden and private investigator Bill Clutter.

"By Monday night, we still hadn't heard anything and everybody was pretty much down in the dumps," says Matt Smith, one of the students involved in the project. "I was thinking about calling Keith, but I figured I'd wait one more day."

But on Tuesday, before Smith got a chance to call Harris, Harris called him with