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Downstate Innocence Project to host awards reception

By **CHRIS DETTRO**

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Rolando Cruz, who was eventually pardoned after three trials and 10 years in custody for a 1983 DuPage County murder, will be the special guest at the third annual Defenders of the Innocent Awards Reception to be held May 24 at the Executive Mansion.

Three people who believed in Cruz's innocence will be honored with Profiles in Courage Awards at the event. Pro Bono awards also will be presented to two Springfield law firms for their work on two area cases that are projects of the Downstate Innocence Project at the University of Illinois Springfield.

Cruz and co-defendant Alejandro Hernandez were convicted and sentenced to death in 1985 for the 1983 kidnaping, rape and murder of 10-year-old Jeanine Nicarico. Another man, Brian Dugan, who had been sentenced to life in prison for two other murders, confessed to the Nicarico crime, but his confession was withheld from Cruz's two retrials.

Eventually, with help from the Innocence Project at Northwestern University, Cruz and Hernandez were exonerated. Cruz was cited as an example of a "system fraught with error" when then-Gov. George Ryan declared a moratorium on the death penalty in Illinois and ultimately commuted the sentences of all death row inmates.

Former Illinois State Police Capt. Edward Cisowski interviewed Dugan and believed that he had killed Nicarico. Former Illinois deputy attorney general Mary Brigid Kenney (now Hayes) and former DuPage County sheriff's detective John Sam both resigned their jobs when they became convinced the wrong men had been convicted of the crime and authorities wouldn't do anything.

All three will receive Profile in Courage Awards for their personal sacrifices in the Cruz case.

A Pro Bono award will be presented to the Springfield firm of Feldman, Wasser, Draper & Cox for its work with the Downstate Innocence Project on the case of Thomas McMillen, one of two men serving a life sentence for the June 24, 1989, murder of Melissa Kooztz, whose body was found west of Springfield.

The firm of Gates, Wise & Schlosser PC will receive the same award for its efforts in the case of Michael Slover Jr. and his parents, Michael Sr. and Jeannette Slover, who are serving 60- to 65-year prison terms after being convicted in Macon County of the 1996 murder and dismemberment of Slover Jr.'s ex-wife, Karyn Slover, in 1986.

Chris Dettro can be reached at 788-1510.

Want to go?

What: Defenders of the Innocent Awards Reception

When: From 5 to 7 p.m. Monday, May 24.

Admission: Tickets for the awards reception are \$100 each, with various levels of sponsorship available. A donor is underwriting the event, and all contributions will go directly to the work of the Downstate Innocence Project.

Registration: Preferred registration deadline is May 17. Registration and further information is available by calling 206-7989 or at the project's website at Innocence.uis.edu.

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