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Wrongfully convicted men to speak at UI

By *The News-Gazette*

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Three men released from prison after being wrongfully convicted will be featured speakers at appearances on the University of Illinois campuses at Springfield and Champaign.

A release from the UI College of Law said the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project at UI Springfield has been awarded a Bloodsworth Postconviction DNA testing grant from the U.S. Department of Justice that will support a collaboration with the UI College of Law and Southern Illinois University School of Law.

The grant is intended to defray the costs of post-conviction DNA testing and help wrongly convicted inmates try to prove their innocence.

To mark the grant, events will be held from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday at the Brookens Auditorium, 1 University Plaza, University of Illinois Springfield, and from 3 to 6 p.m. Wednesday at the University of Illinois College of Law, Max L. Rowe Auditorium, 504 E. Pennsylvania Ave., C. Both events are free and open to the public.

Featured panelists will include:

- Kirk Bloodsworth, the first person to be exonerated from death row in the nation through post-conviction DNA testing and for whom the grant program was named. He had been wrongfully convicted – twice – of the 1984 rape and murder of a 9-year-old Maryland girl.
- Randy Steidl, exonerated after 12 years on Illinois' death row after having been wrongly convicted of the 1986 murders of a Paris, Ill., couple.
- Jerry Hobbs, cleared in the summer of 2010 of the 2005 murders of his own daughter, 8, and a 9-year-old girl in Lake County, Ill.
- Keith Grant, chief of special defense and project development with the office of the Lake County Public Defender, and several Lake County staff, all of whom were associated with Hobbs' exoneration.

The grant will allow students to work on prospective cases that may, through DNA testing, demonstrate actual innocence of individuals serving long sentences in Illinois prisons. The students will work with law school faculty to evaluate evidence and the merit of the actual innocence claims and to develop motions for testing that will be brought to the courts.

"This is an extraordinary educational opportunity for our students. As part of their education, they will be able to work on real cases that could save the lives of innocent individuals here in Illinois. In the process, they learn about criminal law, appellate advocacy, and the type of work that real cases entail," said UI College of Law Professor Steve Beckett.

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