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## Exonerated murder convict speaks at UIS

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The first man exonerated from death row because of DNA evidence spoke Monday about the importance of groups like the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project to save wrongfully convicted people from punishment for crimes they didn't commit.

Kirk Bloodsworth spoke at University of Illinois Springfield's Brookens Auditorium during a ceremony commemorating the Innocence Project's receipt of a \$687,000 federal grant named after Bloodsworth. The grant will help the Innocence Project aid people like Bloodsworth, who was convicted of killing and sexually assaulting a 9-year-old girl in 1984.

The girl was beaten with a rock, sexually abused and then strangled in a wooded area in Rosedale, Md. Bloodsworth was convicted and sentenced to death in 1985. His lawyers appealed, and he was found guilty a second time. Following the second trial, he was sentenced to two consecutive life terms.

It wasn't until June 1993 that DNA evidence proved Bloodsworth was not the culprit.

"Basically we just asked the prosecutors in Baltimore County, where this all happened," Bloodsworth said Monday afternoon. "There's this new technology called DNA, and I'd like to take the test to prove once and for all that it's not me."

The prosecutor told Bloodsworth the evidence had been inadvertently destroyed, he said.

"Nobody knew where the evidence was," he said. "It wasn't destroyed, but it was misplaced."

The evidence was in the judge's chamber and, luckily for Bloodsworth, a court clerk found it. DNA captured as a result of the sexual attack turned out not to match Bloodsworth's DNA.

Bloodsworth said he is not bitter. Instead, he said he channels his energy into activism so no one has to face a death penalty for a crime they never committed.

"You're accused of one of the most heinous crimes you could think of in your own conscience, and the next minute they're trying to execute you and will not say they made a mistake," he said. "I kept thinking of myself sitting in a prison cell for something I didn't do. My activism is one of integrity, trying to get the right kind of thing done for people."

But Bloodsworth's experience is still tinged by anger.

"In January of 1993 my mother dies, and I'm still in prison," he said. "I went to her funeral in handcuffs and shackles for five minutes, and to just see her body. I wasn't allowed to go to her funeral.

"If this can happen to me, an honorably discharged former Marine with no criminal record, it can happen to anybody."

The Downstate Illinois Innocence Project is housed at UIS.

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