

Darryl Hunt: Exonerated after 19 Years

Darryl Hunt was tried and convicted in Winston-Salem in 1985 for the rape and murder of Deborah Sykes. Hunt consistently maintained his innocence. The State sought the death penalty, but the jury recommended a life sentence. In 1989, the North Carolina Supreme Court ordered a new trial because the prosecutor had relied on statements from a witness after the witness had recanted them.

Hunt was offered a plea bargain which would have allowed him to avoid a second trial and be sentenced to time served, meaning he would go free. Hunt turned it down because he refused to confess to something he had not done. Hunt was retried in 1990, and again convicted and sentenced to life.

In 1994, scientific advances allowed for DNA testing of evidence from the crime scene. The testing revealed that the DNA of the rapist did not match Hunt's. In a hearing about the newly discovered scientific evidence, the State changed its story, now insisting that there was more than one assailant, and that Hunt still could have killed Sykes. The judge ruled in favor of the State, and Hunt remained in prison.

Over the years, state and federal courts, including approximately 37 judges, reviewed Hunt's case. Hunt's lawyers asked Governor Hunt and Governor Easley to consider clemency. By 2003, Hunt's appeals were turned down by the courts, and both governors had refused to act. Had Hunt been sentenced to death, he likely would have been executed.

In December 2003, the *Winston-Salem Journal* published an **eight-part series** on the case. Shortly after the series, seven months after an order by a superior court judge and the threat of a contempt citation, the SBI ran the DNA from the crime scene against state and federal databases of convicted felons. A match was found, and a man who had been identified in a similar rape a few months after Sykes' rape and murder was arrested.

That man confessed to having committed the rape and murder alone, and apologized to Hunt and to the victim's family for what he had put them through. The Forsyth County District Attorney, who for years had insisted Hunt was guilty and fought to keep him in prison, came forward and said publicly that he believed Hunt was innocent.

Hunt was exonerated in court on February 6, 2004. On April 15, 2004, at the request of Hunt's attorneys and also the Forsyth County District Attorney, Darryl Hunt was granted a formal **pardon** of innocence by the Governor.