Jacqueline McMurtrie: Good afternoon. Hi, my name's Jackie McMurtrie. I am the Director of the Innocence Project Northwest Clinic here at the Law School, and so it's my delight to welcome you here today for this really wonderful event with Mr. Juan Melendez.

As some of you may know the Innocence Project Northwest has been in existence for over 10 years. During that time we've been successful in overturning the convictions of 12 people in Washington state prisons.

The Innocence Project Northwest Student Chapter is an important support to our efforts in providing public education and community forums to discuss these issues, the causes of wrongful convictions and the remedies.

So it's just a delight to have as the first event, sponsored by the Student Chapter and the National Lawyer skilled Student Chapter, Mr. Juan Melendez here today. He spent 17 years on Florida's Death Row, before he was exonerated for a crime he did not commit. He's going to share with you this harrowing experience of being a victim of the criminal justice system.

So, please join me in welcoming Mr. Melendez.

Audience: [applause]

Juan Melendez: Thank you. Thank you, Jackie. Thank you, thank you. Before I start, I want to thank all of you for being here. Also I want to thank Ms. Shirley, Sister over here, Lerner, and Ms. Jackie, to make this possible.

Also as I tell my story, I want you to keep in mind that it's not at all unique, it happens all the time. I'm the number 99th person to be released from Death Row in the nation, and that's been because of the issue of the innocent, and today has been 130. Also there has been 1,120 people in security, the majority of them in the state of Texas. Only God knows how many of them did not have the luck that I had, and that was innocent. Also as I tell my story, if you feel like crying-cry. If you feel like laughing-laugh. But please--don't fall asleep on me.

Audience: [laughter]

Juan: My name is Juan Roberto Melendez. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, but I was raised on the island of Puerto Rico. They took me back to the island when I was just a little kid. This is
what I remember about the island; I remember going to school bare-footed. I remember that there was a lot of disease. I remember that it was bad water. When you drink this bad water and you walk bare-footed, you get this disease. So a lot of my little brothers died, a lot of little friends died, I survived. I guess I've always been a survivor.

As I go around the country, and I've been just about in every state in the United States and abroad. I've been in over 12 countries in Europe. I've been in Canada about three or four times. I tell the audience my worst mistakes in life. My worst mistakes in life are when; I stopped listening to my mama, I stopped listening to the teachers. I stopped listening to these old people that give me good advice, and went to Guayama and left the older one in there, pay no attention, but it's one that I've got to take to the grave. I can't hardly forgive myself for it, that's when I dropped out of school.

I dropped out of school in the 9th grade. I became a man before time. I was cutting sugar cane when I was 16-17 years old, and when I hit 18 I got tired of it. So I decided to leave the island to make a better life for myself, sinking, searching for what they call "The American Dream." Unfortunately, instead I lived "The American Nightmare."

So I became what you call a fruit picker, a migrant worker. That part of my life I'm proud of, because I was earning the money the honest way. So I went to Delaware, and I picked everything God created over there. When we finished the season, I decided to go to the state of Florida to get the citrus fruit, the grapefruit, the orange, and the lemons.

This is what I can tell you about Florida, how I walked in certain roles in my life, very dangerous roles, but never thought, never crossed my mind, never imagined that one day I would be convicted and sentenced to death for a crime I did not commit.

This journey, this other section in my life, it started in the month of February, 1984. I had to leave Florida early that year, because the citrus fruit got hit by the frost. So all the grapefruits and oranges, they fell down, all we had to do was pick them up. So we were without a job in no time.

So that forced me to migrate from the state of Florida all the way to the state of Pennsylvania, where I knew a farmer that would hire me to prune the peaches and the apple trees. I'll never forget this day, it was a beautiful day. It was on a Monday, May 2nd, 1984.

We were eating lunch under an apple tree. Here come a whole bunch of FBI agents in their cars, riding the hills. They stopped in front of us. They came out of their cars with weapons in their hands, and they pointed at us. They told us to hit the ground, and we did.
Then they called my name, but I was scared to get up because of the weapon that was pointing at me, but I raised my arm. Then they told me to get up and walk down with them, and I did. Then they told me to open my mouth, they wanted to see if I had a missing tooth, and I showed it to them—I still have it. Then they told me to lift the sleeves of my shirt of my left arm. They want to see a tattoo, and I showed it to them.

Then they told me, "Yes, you are the man we are looking for. You are wanted for unlawfully fleeing to avoid prosecution. We have warrants. We have warrants for your arrest for first degree murder and armed robbery." Then they read me some rights, and they slapped some handcuffs on me. Took me in the police car, and took me to a federal prison.

A week or so after that, they took me to court in front of an administrator, a federal judge. He was talking about extradition, but I did not know what extradition mean. I was naive to the law, naive to the language, didn't know the language that well.

So, he barely told me at that time to explain to me what extradition mean. All he told me in Spanish was, "You either fight it or waive it; they're going to take you back anyway." So I start thinking, "I'm not a killer. My mama did not raise no killers. I will waive it, and as soon as they solve this case in Florida, they will let me go." Well, how wrong I was.

So I waived extradition, and they fly me from the state of Pennsylvania all the way back to the state of Florida. A week or so after my arrival, they took me to court in front of a judge. He was reading the charges to me, "You've been indicted, arrested for first degree murder and armed robbery in the state of Florida, the sentence the death penalty against you, the electric chair."

A week or so after that they took me back, right back to court with the same judge, this time to call upon a lawyer to me, a public defender. The truth is I'm not "O.J. Simpson." I don't have money to hire lawyers. So this public defender, I can hardly understand him. He never gave me an interpreter, but he used to pat me on the back and tell me, "Not to worry about it. You're going home." I did understand that 'going home' stuff. I should go home; I did not commit this crime.

So now I'm going to trial. Monday, we start picking the jury. Tuesday, we're still picking the jury. Tuesday evening after they ... So they picked 11 Whites and one African American person, and no Hispanic, and I'm Hispanic. They read instructions to the jury how to conduct themselves in a capital murder case, with a sentence, the death penalty.

Wednesday, that's when the evidence came in, and this is what they had against me. They have what you call a police informant, what they call in the streets a snitch. He claimed that I
confessed the crime to him. This same police informant, the snitch also implicates another person in the crime, an African American man, a Black man, a friend of mine-that's what I thought.

So he gets arrested. He gets arrested, he gets interrogated. He makes fiction statement, he incriminate himself in the crime. He gets charged with it, first degree murder, armed robbery, and they threaten him with the electric chair.

It's time to make a deal. You see the United States prosecutors make deals with criminals. So he was able to strike a deal with this statement, gets his first degree murder charge dropped, gets his armed robbery charge dropped, all the way to accessory after the fact. Gets two years probation, with two years he already had. He gets sentenced to two years probation after I'm convicted and sentenced to death.

Basically, what he is saying that I was, I picked him up, took him to the scene of the crime, dropped him off, came an hour and a half later, pick him up again, took him home, don't know what happened too, after it happened. That's the entire evidence against me, no physical evidence, just two questionable witnesses with a criminal record from here to California. Two questionable witnesses, that make deals with the state, make deals with the prosecutor and they give amnesties for their own crimes they commit.

This is what I had on my favor, on the defense side. I had what you call an alibi witness. I had four witnesses collaborating the alibi testimony. I had all the witnesses testifying, claiming that the police informant had a grudge against me. But I had a problem, every witness that I had on my side was from the African American race, a Black man, a Black woman. When a Black man and a Black woman testify for the state, for the prosecutor, all of a sudden they got good credibility, they even dressed them.

But when a Black man and a Black woman testify for the defense on my side, all of a sudden the credibility is gone. Thursday they found me guilty. Friday, and this is the same week, they sentenced me to death, and the judge complained that it was taking too long. When they sentenced me to death, my heart got full of hate. I became an angry man. I hated the prosecutor. I hated the jurors. I hated the judge, and I hated that one that one pat me in the back, my trial defense lawyer, because I failed, he betrayed me.

But overall, I thought we Puerto Rican men were real macho men. I found out different. I was scared, very scared to die for a crime I did not commit. So now I'm going on Death Row, and I'll never forget that day. It was an ugly day. It was on a Tuesday, November the 2nd, 1984. The place was horrifying, it was dark, it was cold, and they keep me in a six by nine foot cell. Any time they move me out of that cell for whatever reasons, I got shackles in my legs, chains in my waist, and handcuffs in my wrists. The place was also infected with rats and roaches.
So they throw me down in the bottom floor, 17 condemned Death Row prisoners in the bottom floor, 17 in the second floor, 17 in the third, and I made the 248 condemned men to death in the state of Florida, since they reinstated the death penalty in the nation in 1976.

The food, they put the food in a cart. They wheel that cart in the floor in the wing where you're at, and breakfast, that's the worst one. You see they come real early, and they never wake you up. So they place the breakfast tray and a flag that you had in your cell door, like a big mail flag. If you wait five seconds in your bunk to get up, to get your breakfast, forget about it. You're wasting your time, you ran out of luck. You see, the roaches will beat you to it. They're waiting for their breakfast too.

It gets cold in Northern Florida, and they supply us with a thin blanket. I take that blanket, and I covered my foot, face, and all. I don't want to see nothing. But the rats, they also get cold. They want to get warm, so they climb that blanket and I can feel that rat is running up and down. I don't want to look at him, because if I look at him, I'm not going to be able to sleep. But when that rat stays still in my chest, I get a good grip of the blanket and I shake it hard as I can, and I can hear that rat hit the floor, "Boom!" It is a big one.

So I arrive over there on a Tuesday, not that Thursday. The following Thursday, they executed the 10th person in the State of Florida, when I leave that place, 51, today 64, and still counting. But when they executed that 10th person, I got super scared. You see, I do not know the language that well, I do not know the process. I am lost in there. So the thought's in my mind, "They're killing people here every week. How long is it going to be before they get me?"

So I know how to box, and I know all these exercises that you can keep your muscles flexible and defend yourself. So I'm thinking if they come to get me, I'm just going to fight them. I'm not walking to that chair. When I think about it, I'm scared of electricity anyway. So, now I had to come up with a plan. So I decided to take the sheets from my bunk, and cut it all in pieces and make ropes with it, and tie the cell door bars. You see the cell door bars slide like this. I tied this end, and when they push the button in the control room, that door is moving nowhere.

So I'm thinking by the time they cut them ropes up, I can get me a good warm-up, and when they come in and get me, I can defend myself. So now I'm doing exercise. You see, I'm trying to get muscle coming out of my eyebrows. I'm trying to intimidate these people. I'm trying to scare these people, but I'm the one intimidated, I am the one scared.

So it's around count time, and I got the doors all tied up, and here come this correction officer. He's a big, tall African American person, a Black man. He had muscles in his eyebrows. So he
stopped in front of my cell, and when he see the doors all tied up, he gets angry and he started
cursing. I do not know too much English, but I know how to curse. So I remind him of his
mother, father; all the way down.

**Audience:** [laughter]

**Juan:** So, now me and this correction officer, we are in there cursing each other out, and the rest
of the condemned men to death, they got involved in the argument. But to my surprise, it's
against me. They tell me that I'm wrong. So now I get angry with them, and I tell them the best
way I can I know they're killing people here every week, and we are doing nothing. We're
supposed to fight these people. We're supposed to burn the place down. We Puerto Ricans, we
don't go out like that doing nothing, we fight.

They still told me that I was a fool, and I was crazy. They told me that I get up in the morning
and get in the cell door bars, and cry and curse about my innocence. Then they told me that I did
not know how to read, I did not know how to write, I did not know how to speak English.

Then they told me the best thing I could hear at that time, they told me they would teach me. You
see, the worst of the worst, the most undesirable people in the nation, the ones that some
prosecutors called monsters, taught this Puerto Rican how to write, how to read, and how to
speak English.

If they would never taught me, I would never be able to communicate better with my lawyers. I
would not be able to reply the letters that they sent me. Some of them from this great state of
Washington, that show me so much love, so much compassion, that make me feel like a human
being, and today I would not be able to share this sad story with all of you.

I spent 17 years, eight months, and one day, in front of that Death Row for a crime I did not
commit. After 10 years, I was tired of it. I wanted out of there, but the only way out is to commit
suicide, and believe me lots of my friends committed suicide. I'm going to tell you how they do it.
They got what they call a runner. A runner is an inmate that's doing time in prison population;
he's not sentenced to death. They get this runner, this inmate out of prison population, so he can
do the work in the Death Row facility.

He is the one to supply us with the food, the toothpaste, the toothbrush, the mop and the broom,
so you can clean your cell. He also can supply you with a tool that you can take your life with,
and he knows it. All you got to do is give him four stamps or a pack of cigarette rolling paper
tobacco, the cheap kind, and he will give you this tool.

Perhaps he do it because these item that I just mentioned are more important to him than your
life, or perhaps he do it because he call himself assisting you. He works there, he know you want out of there, he know that Death Row is Hell.

The tool was really simple. It's a garbage can plastic bag, the one you see around the garbage cans. You give him four stamps and when the guard ain't looking, he will swing that bag inside your cell. You take that bag, and you twist it all up and you make a rope. Then you put a noose in it, you put the noose in your neck and you tie all the ends in the cell door bars, you throw yourself down, you're dead, but you're free.

That's what the demons used to tell me. "Why? Why you got to go through all this? You're supposed to be a Puerto Rican man, a real macho man. Don't satisfy them, satisfy yourself. You say you didn't do it, you think they're going to believe you? They're going to kill you anyway. So grab that rope. And these thoughts was staying in my mind.

I never see my friends kill themselves, because I cannot see through the walls. But I see when they wheeled the body out. Something in the back of my head tells me, you want to look at your friend for the last time? So I grabbed a mirror that I had in my cell and I stretched my arms through the bars with that mirror. And I look, this is what I see.

I see a purple, blue face that do not look like my friend. I get to see something else, too. I get to see the noose on his neck because they never take it out. And that stay in my mind. So now when I take this trip. You see, I'm tired of it. I want out of there. I'm depressed.

So I tell the brother, get me that garbage bag. So I take that bag and I twist it all up. And I make a rope, then I put a noose in it. Then I look at it and I look at my bunk and I say to myself I better lay down and think about this a little bit more.

So I take that rope and I throw under the bunk so when the guards walk by they don't see it. And I laid down. When I lay down I fall in a deep, deep sleep. I start dreaming that I'm a little kid again, doing the things I used to do when I was a little kid, the things that make me laugh, the things that make me happy.

You see, I born in Brooklyn, NY, but I raised on the island of Puerto Rico. When I get up in the morning and I look to the east side there's a wonderful mountain. And if I walk six minutes to the south I find myself in the most beautiful beach in the world. It looks to me.

So here I am dreaming that I'm swimming in the beautiful Caribbean Sea. The water is warm. The sun is bright. The sky is blue. The palm trees look so good. It's a beautiful day. Then I gets
to see something that I never seen before, four dolphins coming my way. And a pair get on one side. And a pair get on the other side.

And they start flipping and jumping like dolphin do and having a ball in there. I am so happy. And then I look to the shore and it's a lady that's waving at me, smiling at me and she seems so happy. And I know why she's happy. She's happy because I'm happy. That's my dear mother.

And then I wake up. When I wake up the bunk smell like a beach. So I got that rope last night to take my life with and I walk straight to the toilet with it and I look at it and I look at the rope. I say real loud, "I don't want to die!" and I flush it.

For the next five years, there were lots and lots of beautiful dreams. Every time I got depressed, every time I wanted out of there, every time suicide thoughts came to my mind, I would pray to God, send me a beautiful dream. And I was wise enough to take all those dreams as a sign of hope that one day I would be out of there. I would be free.

Like God was telling me, hey, I know you didn't do it. But I control the time. You'll get out when I say you get out. You just got to trust me. When I acknowledge everything, I came to this conclusion: it took 17 years, eight months and one day to also change the man.

Eternity is a law made by human beings and carried out by human beings. We all know, we humans, we make mistakes. The death penalty should also know that they bring a lot of pain on both sides of the family -- on the family of victim of homicides, and the family of the woman and man that is condemned to death.

Where family is concerned this is all I had: momma and five aunts. Oh, I had brothers. I got sisters. I got uncles. I got lots of cousins. But they never wrote me a letter. Just momma and five aunts, I do not know how the aunts are in this generation, but in my generation when I was growing up, if my aunt caught me doing something wrong, believe me, it's going to be a good ass whoopping.

And then I got to pray to God that she don't tell momma. Because when she tell momma, it's going to be another good ass whoopping. But when I was hungry, they feed me. When I needed a pair of pants, they bought it for me. And they wrote. They never forgot me.

They wrote me lots and lots of letters. They send me lots and lots of pictures, photos of the ones that are born and I never seen. And I saw all of them grow up through pictures. Love to keep the family together. And momma, I'm afraid I have to tell you that, I believe she suffered more than
anybody. She also wrote me lots and lots of letters that gave me so much hope that helped me keep the will to live.

And this one letter that I keep with me all the time and when I'm down and out, sad and weak, I read it. And it always boosts me up. And it go like this, she wrote and say:

"Son, I just built an altar. In that altar I put the statue of the vision of the Guadalupe in it. And I got roses and I put it in it. And I pray five rosaries a day, looking for a miracle."

[Background noise] Sorry about that.

"...and the miracle will come, son. Because I know you are innocent and God know that you innocent. But you got to put your trust in him and he will set you free."

It took 17 years, eight months and one day when the miracle came true. Thank God for that. But in spite of all that faith and hope that my momma had in God, she was saving the money to bring the body back to the island in case the State of Florida would persecute me. And no mother in this world should go through that pain.

The conditions that especially the medical conditions, oh, you better not get sick in Death Row. You see, they love to use common sense. And the common sense is always against you. Why? Why give you the best medication when the government can sign your death warrant today and kill you tomorrow?

Why waste the best medication on a person that's condemned to death? And all of you to understand or comprehend the condition, the medical condition, the type of people that run this facilities.

Unfortunately, I had to share with you another sad story. We go to the yard four hours a day. Two hours on a Monday, two hours on a Wednesday, if it's not raining. They got a word that the weathermen use a lot when it is bad weather and they use it inside, too. Inclement weather today. No yard. And there is one drop of rain falling.

But this day we all went. The only one that told me how to read, how to write and how to speak English, but in particular this African-American person, this black man, I call him "Brothers." They all taught me, how to read and how to write and how to speak English. But this one, he was pushy. You need to learn this. You need to learn that. And I love him dear for that, because I
learned a lot from him.

The brothers they loved to play basketball. Some others, played volleyball. I lift weights because I can burn steam and go back to the cell and rest a little bit better. So the brother, my friend, is playing basketball and all of a sudden he falls to the ground. And we all got concerned.

We went to check him out to see what was wrong with him. And when I got close to him, I noticed that white foam was coming out of his mouth and nose. So assume it's got to be a stroke, a heart attack. So we tell the guards in the gate, you have a man down that need medical assistance.

They take their time with a walkie-talkie. They call the clinic. And here comes this so called nurse. He was a tall white man with a great big belly. And they let him inside the gate and from the gate they told us in the yard to put our back to the fence.

And from the gun towers, they point machine guns at us. And you better not move, they would shoot you. So now, this let this so called nurse inside the yard. And I notice he don't have no medical bag, but he had something. He had about a half a pound of chewing tobacco in his mouth. And every once in a while, he spits.

He's in the yard now and there's a brother on the ground. So we tell him: he's not breathing. He need air. So he say, I got to go back to the clinic and get an oxygen tank. And he spits. So he walks real slow to the clinic. And come back, walking real slow with an oxygen tank.

He gets in the yard and puts the accident down and my friend Marvin, then, the nurse get ups again. And we tell him. He's still not breathing. He need air. And he say, I got to back again to the clinic and get another accident this one in here is not working. And he spits.

And I tell him, you don't have to. You can do CPR mouth to mouth. But telling one of them to do CRR, mouth to mouth, to a brother in the ground you are wasting your time. Well, he looks up. Then he looks down. Then he makes a statement using these two racist words: the M and the N. I'm not going to put my mouth in there and he spits.

I tell him, you don't have to. I do it. You just do the counting. And he agreed. I'm so glad he agreed. You see, I'm trying to save my friend's life. So I rushed down there. And I took my tee shirt off and I wipe from friend what he had on his mouth and nose. And the so-called nurse, he start counting.
One, two, three and I blow air. One, two, three, and I blow air again. One, two, three and I blow air. My friend opened his eyes. I'm so glad he opened his eyes. I see a sign of hope. He's going to live! But all of a sudden his eyes roll back. Then he made a frown with his face and mouth.

I can see right because he never left me. Then he breathed real hard and air came out. I think that's where his soul left him, because he died right in my arms.

So now I'm angry. And I want to do something to that nurse that let my friend die in the yard like a dog. When I took a swing at him, here come the rest to condemn me to death. Snatch me out of there. Throw me in a corner and they say: "Puerto Rican Johnny, don't get in more trouble than you are already in. We got other ways to handle this."

I still go to confinement for 90 days for disrespecting the member of the staff, whatever that mean. But I learned a lesson. I learned that I had to trust, rely and look for something more powerful than the system. And the only thing I could see that more powerful than the system is our creator, God.

The truth is that a condemned woman or man to death that do not grab something that is spiritual will go crazy or commit suicide. Some of them become Muslims and praise Allah and they teach others how to read, how to write, how to speak English, how to respect.

Some of them become Buddhists. I don't know what they praise. But they teach others how to have compassion, how to love, how to forgive. Some of them become Christians. That's what I did. I had to go back to my roots and remember everything my momma told me about the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost.

The truth is she's Catholic to the bones. And this is my personal opinion, only mine. I believe we are serving the same God with different names. All we got to do is make good choices in life, do good deeds and we have no problem going to heaven.

This friend of mine that the State of Florida, let him die in the yard like a dog, one month after his death he wins a new trial. But the State of Florida let my friend die in the yard like a dog. The State of Florida denied my friend his right to prove his innocent.

So now you know about the suicide and you know about the condition, but especially the medical condition. In fact, the people that run this facilities, let me tell you the worst of all. The worst of all is when the government kill. When they execute someone. You see them. I'm in the
cell. And in the next cell to me is another man condemned to death. I have him for 10 or 15 years.

He's cries in my shoulders. I cries in his. He share his most intimate thoughts with me. I share mine with him. I grow to learn to love him. One day they snatch him out of the cell and I know what's going to happen. They are going to kill him. And I cannot stop it.

And in my time is the electric chair. And they got to generate the chair with electricity. And I can hear this boozy sound. Mmmm, mmmmm, that still stay in my mind. And I cannot stop it. And believe me, some of them are innocent. Like Jesse Tafero, Bennie Demps, Leo Jones, Pedro Medina. The last one they executed, the last one before that they was given the state of Florida.

Dear friend, home boy, Angel Diaz, and I still cannot stop it. What I can say, I see you soon. But enough of disaster stories.

Let me tell you how I got out of there. And I tell you right from the jump, I was not saved by the system. I was saved in spite of the system. I was saved by the grace of God. Pure luck, if you want to call it luck.

So here comes my attorney with tears running down her cheeks. And she tells me, "Juan, I cannot handle your case no more."

And I say, "Miss Gayle, why? I don't need no new lawyers now. You know my case better than anybody."

And she tells me, "You know why. I lost five clients. They are your friends." Don't misunderstand what I'm saying when I say she lost five clients. Yes, five clients that got killed. If you want to become a criminal lawyer and I wish you will because we need you, be careful with these death penalty cases.

There's going to be a time when you got to tell your client that make peace with your family. I do it the best I can for you. Well, make peace with your family assume that it's over. It's not a situation that you want to go through.

So, she tells me, "Don't worry about it, Juan. I'm going to get the agency to sign the best three lawyers they got and the best investigator." I finally got the dream team. So here come my new lawyer. And he tells me, "Melendez, you have lost too many appeals."
I reply by saying, "Tell me something new."

Then he say, "But we going to try one more time, but if you lose this one you'll be lucky if you live three years."

I say, "No, man, if I lose this one, I be lucky if I live a year and a half. You know who the government of Florida is. Old Jeb Bush he would have no problem in signing it."

So now he start using words to send the investigator out to see my trial defense lawyer. Remember the one that used to pat me on the back. And the first miracle occur, my trial defense lawyer just became a judge. I'm so glad he became a judge. You see, by him becoming a judge it creates what they call in the legal world a conflict of interest. And that conflict of interest gave me the opportunity to move my case out of that racist county.

Out of the county where the family created the case against me. The county where the old boy network operates. And it moves from Bartow, Polk County, Florida. And by the way, boy, don't go over there. [laughter] It moves to Hillsborough County, Tampa, Florida.

They falls in the hands of a ferocious woman, a female judge that go by the name of the Honorable Barbara Fletcher. I can sincerely say I owe her my life. So going back in the story when my investigator going to see my trial defense lawyer, the one who used to put on the back that just is a judge.

He tells her, "I'm a judge now. I got a new office. But in the old office where I used to do my defense work, I think there is a box in there with the name 'Melendez' on it. You can go in there and have it."

So she rush over there and grabbed that box, took it to her office, went inside it and dug out a tape cassette and play it. Guess what, the confession of the real killer was in that tape cassette. And my trial defense lawyer, the one who used to put on the back, had it one month before trial. So now this opened a can of worms.

When the judge heard this taped confession of the real killer, she decide to make a court order to the prosecutor office and the man he sent files on my case. And he did.

Guess what? He had a copy, a transcript of the taped confession of the real killer. He also had it
one month before trial. But he had something else, too. He had 16 documents that corroborated the taped confession of the real killer. 16 documents that he never turned in to trial defense lawyer at the time of the trial.

What creates in the legal world a evidence violation, withholding exculpatory evidence, evidence that indicate you did not commit the crime. By that time I already had three evidentiary hearings and I was able to establish more than 20 witnesses that also corroborated the taped confession of the real killer, including the wife and sister of the real killer.

And current law enforcement officers. Including a former FBI agent. Including a former prosecutor investigator. Including friends of the real killer, criminal lawyers. In the end they even found physical evidence against the real killer. The real killer was also a police informant.

So now, Honorable Barbara Fletcher got all the ammunition and she decided to write 72-page opinion on it. And that 72 page opinion, he chastised the prosecutor for the way he handled the case. She chastised law enforcement officers for the way they investigated the case. And she chastised them in the back for the way he called himself defending me.

And she ordered a new trial. And she let them know and opinion that the case was damaged, everything in the case you have an innocent man on Death Row. The prosecutor decided not to process the case, dropped the case, dismissed the case. And that's why I'm here, thank God. Talking to you now.

[applause]

Thank you. I never know the time and date that was going to release me. It caught me totally by surprise. They came to my cell and put shackles on my legs, chains in my waist and handcuffs in my wrists. And they took me to a place that they called information room. It's right there not too far from the Death Row facilities.

They sat me in a chair and in front of me is a desk and behind the desk is a lady working computers. And she started making some crazy questions. She asked me for my social security number and I wonder why, but I give it to her. I know it by heart.

Then she came up with some more silly questions. Where do you work at? What type of job do you have? Who are you working with? And I almost give her a weird look, because she got up off her chair and put both hands in the desk that was in front of me. And she looked straight in my eyes and she say, "Melendez, you do not understand what's going on here, do you?"
I said, "Lady, I don't have the slightest idea. I live cross the streets. I been in there for almost 18 years. I'm in Death Row. They don't have no jobs in Death Row."

[laughter]

Then she say, "Melendez, you are facing your paperwork. They are going to release you today."

And I don't know if you watch cartoons, and you see this cartoon character, he takes a sledge hammer and he's hit on the head with it. And then you can see another come straight up. And he got stars that's going around his head. He's in a state of shock! But he's smiling.

That's how I was, in a state of shock, but smiling. And I'm still smiling today. Then the correction officers they start acting different. They offer me sandwiches and soda pops.

[laughter]

I say, "No, I don't want no sandwich. I don't want no soda pop. I want to go back to my cell and pack everything up and get the hell out of here." Then I had to take physicals and I was first for everything. They move everybody out of the way, home instead of me.

And then they start calling me something they never called like that before. They start calling me, "Mr. Melendez." I liked that. And then by that time everybody knew that I was going to be released from Death Row.

So I pack everything up and all of a sudden my cell door packed right open. And I find myself with the captain of the prison and two correction officers. And I'm going to lie to you. I got scared again, because I no trust these people.

But I turn around so they can slap the handcuffs on me. And when they put the handcuffs on me, the captain of the prison told him, "No, don't put no handcuffs on Mr. Melendez today. Mr. Melendez is a free man. Mr. Melendez is going home. Mr. Melendez walks out of here without handcuffs." I liked that, too.

So now, I want to say goodbye to the man in the last cell and I'm in the cell next to last. So I
come out my cell and I got tears that's running down my cheeks. And I got a smile in my face. But I cannot say nothing. I'm happy but part of me is still sad, because I'm leaving them behind.

And I know what's going to happen. If we do not abolish the death penalty, they are going to kill them all. Well, he was able to say something. He had tears running down his cheeks and a smile on his face. He was able to speak and this is what he said. His first word was, "Don't get in no trouble there." Then he say, "Take care of yourself." Then he say, "Don't forget about us."

Then he say, last word was, "Take care of you momma." They all know my momma. This man that told me these words, his name is Collins Hills. He changed his name to Rachar. He became a Muslim. Unfortunately. I have to tell you that. On Sept. 20 of last year, he was executed. God rest his soul.

So now, I'm walking down the hallway and there's about everyone of them telling me the same thing. And then before I get to the door that's going to lead me out of the wing, out of that floor, I hear a clap. Then I hear the second clap. Then I hear the third clap. Then I hear a whole bunch of claps.

They was making so much noise by clapping and hollering and whistling that the correction office got angry with them and told them to shut up, to be quiet. Then stop talking, making noise, hollering and whistling to a leave that place.

They was real glad to see me go. So now, I'm in the door that will lead me to freedom and when they opened that door, this is what I saw: I saw a whole bunch of reporters. CNN, ABC, the Association of Press, everybody was in there. And no offense, but reporters sometimes make some silly questions.

[laughter]

The first one was: "How do you feel?" [laughter] I told them how I feel. I feel happy. I'm going home. So here come this other reporter, this female reporter, with some more crazy questions. She told me, "Where are you going? What you going to do? What are you going to see?"

I did not told her that I wanted to Disney World. [laughter] I told her, and it came naturally, it came from my heart. I told her I wanted to see the moon. I wanted to see the stars. I want to walk on grass, on dirt. I want to hold a little baby in my arm and play with him. Of course, I told her I wanted to talk to some beautiful women.
That reporter I had in front of me. She was ugly. But that's a joke. I missed the things that we take for granted, the simple things in life. I cannot understand the people in the free world that when they tell me they are bored, when so many good things that God create for us that we can enjoy, take care and love.

When there are so many good things and good choices we can make in life. And thinking about good deeds and good choices, I have to tell you this. This is what I see in here. I see great prosecutors. I see great law enforcement officers. I see great lawyers, they deserve everything. Good people.

The problem with the death penalty is this, it's all about the tales. It's all about the education. And we need you to get involved. People need to know that it does not deter crime. People need to know that it costs too much. People need to know that it's racist. People need to know that the as long as the United States have in any country that have it, you always will be a risk to execute an innocent one.

You see, you always can release an innocent man from prison, but you can never and I repeat, you can never release an innocent man from the grave.

So God bless you and peace and love to you all.