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Mother of pardoned Oklahoma man fights for those wrongly convicted



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Maggie Carlo

Vicki Behenna liked the idea of helping people and the search for justice.

"The only thing I really ever wanted to do was be a trial lawyer," she said.



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Behenna started working in the U.S. Attorney's Office in 1988 as a trial lawyer and, after a few years, she was assigned to the Bank Fraud Unit. A sentencing for a trial she was the lead prosecutors on has haunted her for years.

"It was a very, very difficult experience for me to watch a family who was sitting on the front row who loved and cared about these gentlemen watch as the judge sentenced them to time in prison," Behenna said.

Behenna told KOCO 5 that she thought about quitting that day, thinking this wasn't the job for her.

"I think people don't really understand how valuable our liberty is until you watch somebody have their liberty taken away," she said.

It wasn't until years later, though, that the nagging feeling Behenna had and a very personal crisis led her to resign in 2013 as assistant United States attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma.

"Sometimes, the truth doesn't get told. I experienced it with my son," she said.

Her son is Michael Behenna. He is the first lieutenant who was in the news a lot earlier this year after he received a pardon from President Donald Trump. Michael Behenna had been convicted in February 2009 for the murder of Ali Mansur Mohamed while Behenna was serving in Iraq. He always maintained he acted in self-defense.



President Trump grants pardon to Oklahoma man who killed Iraqi prisoner

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"When he turns to look at Monsur, he's now not seated on the rock. He's standing. His arm is outstretched," Vicki Behenna said. "Michael thinks he's reaching for his service revolver, and he shoots and kills him."

Michael Behenna was sentenced to 25 years in prison but was paroled after five years.

"We've worked every single day to try and right the wrong that happened to him," Vicki Behenna said.

Michael Behenna's attorney learned there was forensic evidence that had been kept from the defense corroborating his version of events. Ten years after the conviction, Michael Behenna received the call from Trump.



'Pres. Trump called': Former soldier convicted of killing Iraqi prisoner speaks after pardon

"He said, 'Did you recognize who I was talking to?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'You really didn't recognize the voice?' And I said, 'No.' And he said, 'Mom, that was President Trump.' He said, 'Mom, he's giving me a full pardon,'" Vicki Behenna said.

But her search for justice is not over. She's now a criminal defense attorney, and she's currently the executive director of the Oklahoma Innocence Project, working to exonerate those who have been wrongly convicted.

In 2016, Vicki Behenna helped free two Oklahoma man for a 1995 murder they did not commit.

"I remember being physically sickened at how these young men, at the age of 18, were

convicted of first-degree murder and given life without parole on the most minuscule of evidence," she said.

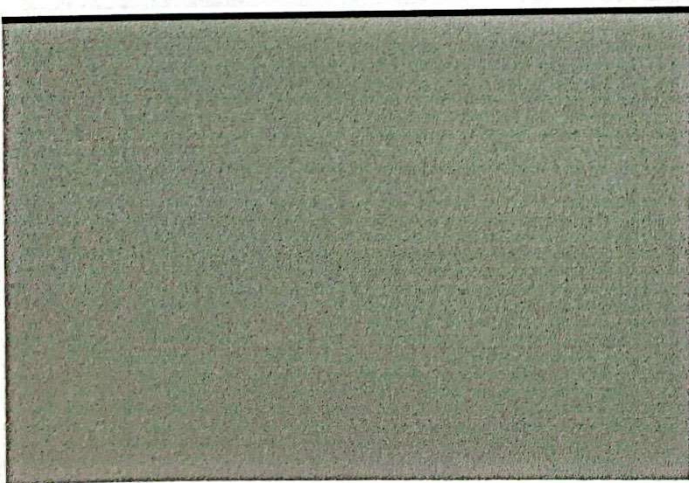
Malcolm Scott and De'Marchoe Carpenter were each sentenced to 170 years behind bars. But, because of Vicki Behenna and the work of the Oklahoma Innocence Project, a judge agreed to review their case. In May 2016, the judge declared them "actually innocent" based on new evidence the jury that convicted them never saw.

"It is the hardest, most challenging legal work I have ever done," Vicki Behenna said.

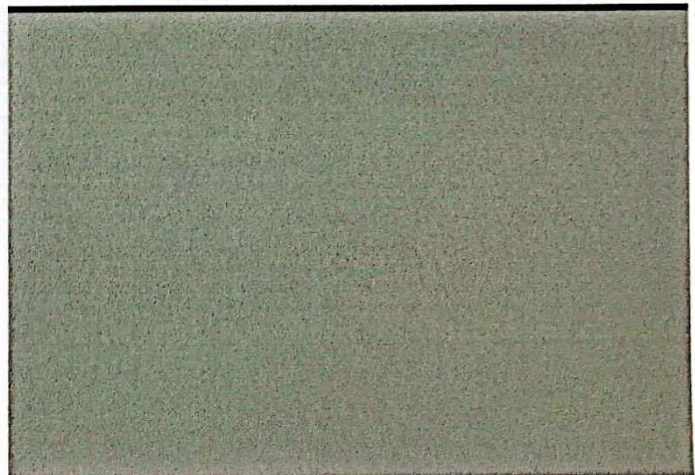
The Oklahoma Innocence Project is reviewing some 800 cases. Many asking for help likely don't know the woman leading the team of attorneys deeply understands all sides of justice as a former prosecutor, as a parent, who so desperately wanted justice for her own son and, now, as a defense attorney.

"I'm doing justice. I'm doing the same thing you're doing, I'm just doing it on the back end to make sure that, if we got a conviction, we did it the right way," Vicki Behenna said.

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