

Leonard Cure, wrongfully imprisoned for 16 years and exonerated, shot dead by Georgia police officer

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In the early morning hours of October 16, Leonard Allan Cure, who had recently been exonerated after having been wrongfully convicted of an armed robbery in the state of Florida, was shot dead by a Georgia police officer. Cure had been released from prison in 2020 after being found innocent of the 2003 armed robbery. He had spent 16 long years in prison.

Cure, 53, was driving back to his home in Metro Atlanta after having visited his mother who lives in Port St. Lucie, Florida. He appears to have left very early in the morning from his mother's home, taking the longer route via the I-95 freeway, which makes the drive 622 miles instead of 522 miles. It is quite possible that he may have taken the longer route to avoid the speed traps in Georgia, for which the state is notorious.

It was during this drive in his white pickup truck that Cure was pulled over in Camden County, Georgia, purportedly speeding at 100 miles per hour on the interstate highway, where the speed limit is mostly 70 miles per hour.

The Camden County Sheriff's office subsequently released the following bodycam video of the fatal encounter.

After Cure pulled over to the side of the highway, the police officer, identified as Camden County Sheriff's Deputy Buck Aldridge, shouted at the top of his lungs at Cure. Pointing a taser gun at him, the officer threatened to tase him if he did not walk to the back of the pickup truck.

After some verbal exchanges, Cure asked Aldridge why he was being pulled over and the officer shouted at him that he was speeding. Cure is seen replying to the officer that it is a speeding violation, implying that the officer should give him a speeding ticket and let him

go. The police officer instead responded, again shouting, that speeding is a criminal offense in Georgia, and he will arrest Cure for "reckless driving."

Cure refused Aldridge's order to put his hands behind his back, instead keeping them on the side of his truck, at which point the deputy shot him with his taser. Having been tased, Cure got agitated and started to scuffle with the officer. As Aldridge wrestled Cure to the ground he shot him with his service weapon at close range.

Aldridge has a history of violence, having been fired from the Kingsland, Georgia, police department in 2017 after he slammed a woman to the ground during a traffic stop.

The state of Georgia under both Republican and Democratic administrations has criminalized minor traffic violations such as speeding. They are classified as misdemeanors and carry up to 12 months in prison or a \$1,000 fine, or both. The decision to arrest someone for speeding has been entirely left to the discretion of the police officers, who are notorious for their hostile attitude towards citizens they encounter.

A devastated Mary Cure, Leonard Cure's mother, recalled his parting words as he drove back to his home in Metro Atlanta.

"He said 'I love you and I'll see you soon,' that's the last I heard from him," Mary Cure told *The Messenger*.

She also emphasized the threat of reimprisonment of her son that constantly haunted her, reflecting the nightmarish conditions confronting such families, even after their loved ones had been exonerated.

"I was uneasy every time he left, because I was like, 'Will he get a traffic stop? Is he going to be a victim of

that?” She went on: “From the time that he was released, he was never set free, [I] lived in constant fear ... is this going to be the day that they’re gonna lock him up, beat him up, or kill him? I lived with that. That is torture.”

Cure was wrongfully convicted for an armed robbery that occurred at a Walgreens store in Dania Beach, Florida, on November 10, 2003. The trial was a gross travesty of justice and reveals the utterly callous determination of both prosecutors and judges to get someone convicted despite shoddy evidence.

The robbery purportedly netted \$1,700 for the yet-to-be-known perpetrator from a giant corporate pharmacy that has been repeatedly exposed for robbing thousands of patients of hundreds of millions of dollars by overcharging them.

The prosecution was riddled with holes right from the beginning and Cure was identified as the perpetrator based upon contradictory evidence from the two employees of Walgreens who witnessed the robbery. Cure never had a proper defense attorney, exposing him to a court system which is notorious for convicting individuals even when lacking evidence beyond a reasonable doubt.

In addition, there was all sorts of official misconduct during the investigation by the prosecutor’s office. Despite this, Cure ended up convicted, and was given the draconian sentence of life in prison. Although he filed repeated appeals to the court insisting on his innocence, the Court of Appeals in Florida quickly rejected his appeals and upheld his conviction.

It was only in December 2019 that Cure got another chance to request a new investigation of his case, after a Conviction Review Unit (CRU) was created in Broward County. It was during this review that the CRU reached out to the non-profit Innocence Project of Florida (IPF), which subsequently appointed its own attorney for his defense.

His new attorney got him released on April 14, 2020, while a re-investigation of his conviction by the CRU was taking place. The re-investigation concluded that witnesses’ identification of Cure was inappropriately conducted, and the CRU recommended his complete exoneration to the court.

It was then, on December 11, 2020, that the judge presiding over his case vacated his entire conviction, and three days later all of the charges on which he was

convicted were dropped.

Subsequently, in August, Cure received a written apology from the state of Florida for his wrongful conviction and 16-year imprisonment. He was also financially compensated with a meager sum of \$817,000, which works out to a little over \$50,000 for each year of his wrongful imprisonment.

After Cure gained his freedom in April 2020, he reestablished relations with his family and was trying to rebuild his life. He moved to Metro Atlanta and planned to attend college for music production, hoping to start a career in music.

Cure was among the few persons lucky enough to have their wrongful convictions overturned. According to IPF, in the state of Florida alone, 245 persons, representing an astounding 3826 years of imprisonment, have been released since IPF was founded in 1992. Undoubtedly, given that this is a single and small organization that can only focus upon a limited number of cases, the number of innocents railroaded to prison could well be orders of magnitude higher.

According to one study, up to 5 percent of the incarcerated in US prisons, numbering at least 100,000, could be innocent. At least 195 persons who were given the death penalty have been exonerated. In fact, the Death Penalty Information Project states that, “There is no way to tell how many of the 1,578 people executed since 1976 may also have been innocent.”



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