

DEATH PENALTY INFORMATION CENTER

1320 18th Street NW, 5th Floor, Washington, DC 20036

Phone: (202) 293-6970 ☎ Fax: (202) 822-4787 ☎ Email: dpic@deathpenaltyinfo.org

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CONTACT: BRENDA BOWSER

or RICHARD DIETER

Office (202) 293-6970, Cell (301) 943-1402

Additional contacts listed below

GLARING DEFICIENCIES IN THE DEATH PENALTY SYSTEM CONFIRMED AS ANOTHER INMATE IS FREED

***Gordon Steidl Is the 114th Death Row Inmate to be Exonerated
and the 18th in Illinois***

WASHINGTON, DC – Gordon “Randy” Steidl walked out of the Danville Correctional Facility in Illinois today, 17 years after being sent to death row for crimes he never committed. Thorough investigations by the State Police, the Attorney General, the Edgar County prosecutor, federal judges and journalism students have found no evidence of Steidl’s involvement in the tragic murders of Dyke and Karen Rhoads.

Steidl became the nation’s 114th exonerated death row inmate today, according to an announcement made by the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC). Steidl’s conviction was thrown out last year because of the poor quality of representation he was given at trial. Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan decided not to appeal the federal court’s ruling for a new trial and Edgar County prosecutors announced today that they will not retry the case. Steidl spent 12 years on death row and another five years in prison on a life sentence before being freed. He is the 18th death row inmate from Illinois to be exonerated since 1987.

“The series of errors that led to this erroneous conviction and the time it took for Steidl to be freed are shocking,” said Richard Dieter, Executive Director of DPIC, “especially when combined with the continuous exposure of such cases around the country. The demonstrated risk of executing the innocent has far exceeded reasonable bounds.”

No physical evidence ever linked Steidl or his co-defendant, Herbert Whitlock, to the crime, but they were found guilty largely based on the testimony of two witnesses who came forward long after the crime. Both witnesses later recanted their testimony.

During trial, Steidl was represented by an inexperienced attorney who failed to fully investigate the prosecution’s case. Steidl won a new sentencing hearing in 1999 based on his attorney’s ineffectiveness, and the jury re-sentenced Steidl to life. In 2003, a federal judge ordered a new trial, stating that if all the evidence that should have been investigated had been presented at trial, it was “reasonably probable” a jury would have found Steidl not guilty. Following the federal ruling, the state reinvestigated the case, including tests on DNA evidence, and found no link to Steidl.

Steidl's case has long drawn criticism from defense attorneys, journalists, and investigators familiar with the facts of the crime. It was one of many capital crimes examined by journalism students at Northwestern University, and an Illinois State Police investigation in 2000 found that local police had botched their investigation so badly that innocent men, Steidl and Whitlock, had been convicted.

Steidl is the second death row inmate freed in 2004. Alan Gell of North Carolina was released in February. In 2003, 10 persons were freed from death row in the United States, equaling the most exonerations in a single year since the death penalty was reinstated.

Those seeking more information about this case may contact Steidl's attorney, Michael Metnick at (217) 753-4242 or Rob Warden of Northwestern University's Center for Wrongful Convictions at (312) 286-5899. Please contact DPIC for further information about innocence and the death penalty or for comment about this case.

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