

# DAILY NEWS

## John Ramsey's quest for vindication of a murder he says he didn't commit 37 years ago

By Graham Rayman | February 10, 2019



John Ramsey recently with his lawyer Craig Phemister (Obtained by Daily News)

He believed he had to say he was guilty of murder to have a chance to prove that he wasn't.

John Ramsey says that in 2015 he found himself facing a wretched predicament — he believed that he needed to admit to a murder he says he didn't commit or maintain his innocence and stay in prison. Ramsey had been repeatedly denied parole and had already spent 33 years behind bars.

Ramsey, who had been sentenced to 25 years to life, says he needed to be on the outside to finally have a chance to prove that he didn't kill Vernon Gill in Brooklyn in 1981. So, he says, with great effort he choked back his emotions and told the state Parole Board that he had committed the crime.

"I'm walking back and forth before the hearing with tears in my eyes," Ramsey, now 58, told the Daily News. "It was more frustration than anything. I just couldn't take this (prison) anymore. Once I was out, I knew I would get vindicated."

He was paroled, and now his quest to overturn his conviction has reached a crucial point.

On Friday, his lawyers filed a motion alleging that in 1982 the Brooklyn District Attorney's office did not turn over an arrest report that might have saved Ramsey from all those years behind bars.

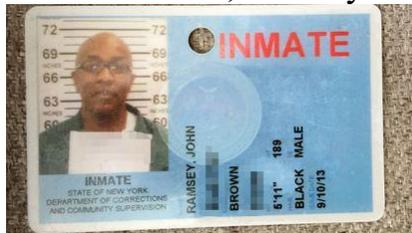
That motion came after the DA's Conviction Review Unit (CRU) signaled it would not recommend the conviction be overturned, even though it agrees the arrest report should have been given to Ramsey's trial attorney.

John Ramsey grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Flatbush. By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, he had stopped going to school and began a slow turn toward the underworld. By 15, he was stealing cars and selling them to Brooklyn chop shops.

Within a few years he would be accused of murder.

On Oct. 30, 1981, Vernon Green and five other people were smoking pot and angel dust in a drug den on E. 22<sup>nd</sup> St. in Flatbush. Two men, one carrying a shotgun, burst in and demanded money. Green grabbed for the gun and was fatally shot in the chest. Weeks later, according to the motion, a man named Cole Coleman admitted to having a role in Green's murder and secretly named Ramsey as his accomplice, but never testified against him.

In March 1982, Ramsey was arrested for Green's murder. He was 21.



John Ramsey's Prison ID. (Obtained by Daily News)

A jury convicted him on the testimony of a single witness, who admitted he had been smoking angel dust all day, according to the motion.

Michael Vecchione, his defense lawyer at the trial, says he was stunned. "I recognized when I first met him that this was not the kind of guy who would commit a murder in a crack house," he said. "There was not a doubt in my mind that he was not guilty."

Coleman got nine years in a plea deal, the motion says. Ramsey got 25-to-life.

He served time in eight prisons, including Attica, Sullivan, and Sing Sing. He interacted with drug gang lords, mobsters, and Son of Sam killer David Berkowitz. Ramsey says he learned to survive in places where stabbings and slashings regularly occurred by being careful about who he associated with and never joining prison factions.

“Prison is a thinking game,” he says. “You need to cultivate an air of mystery. You want them to know you’re thinking, but not to know what the hell you thinking.”

Bernard Johnson, now 45, served 10 years for a Queens robbery in a cell next to Ramsey at the Sullivan Correctional Facility. “He definitely gave me pointers and tips to stay away from trouble,” Johnson said in an interview. “Just to be your own man and stay away from prison politics.”

Ramsey says he was in a lot of fights during the first 15 years. “You have to build a reputation for not taking s--- from anyone,” he said.

There was the day he felt a guard was treating him unfairly and he challenged the guard to a fight. They traded punches and Ramsey knocked him down. The guard honored terms agreed before the fight and didn’t report it.

But, Ramsey says, there was a culture of cruelty among some guards, and that some guards who mistreat inmates are often not punished but promoted.

“You got superintendents who shouldn’t be superintendents because of what they did coming up in the ranks,” he said. “They (guards) commit crimes. They will set you up.”

Ramsey recalls a snowy day while he was in Attica when a sergeant brought him into a room, called him a “piece of s---“ and swung at him. The sergeant then signaled other officers by banging his nightstick on the floor, Ramsey says.

Guards rushed in and beat Ramsey senseless, he says, knocking out some of his teeth. He was placed in solitary confinement for 90 days.

The years slipped away.

Vecchione says he kept in touch with Ramsey and sent him Christmas cards. “He knew and I knew the jury did the wrong thing,” he says.

In 2005, Ramsey’s sister died from cancer. His mother was in her seventies. He had more reasons to want to get out.

A year later, one of Ramsey’s document requests yielded a heavily redacted arrest report showing that one hour after Green’s murder, two men fitting the description

of the murderers were arrested within a couple of blocks of the crime scene. Their names were blacked out.

Ramsey pressed for parole, but was denied. His lawyer, Craig Phemister, says he believes they denied him parole “because he didn’t seem remorseful and didn’t know the details of the case.”

Those details, according to the motion, included an error in Ramsey’s parole file that said six people had identified him as the shooter.

When Ramsey was paroled, a friend met him with an iPhone 6, a device foreign to Ramsey. So much had changed, but Ramsey’s determination to prove his innocence remained constant.

He sought legal representation from the law firm Napoli Shkolnik, which has a wrongful conviction team, persistently sitting in the lobby every day for weeks until he got a lawyer to listen to him.

“He just wanted someone to hear his story,” says Phemister. “Finally, I said I have to sit down with this guy.”

Phemister agreed to put some of the firm’s resources behind Ramsey’s case. They first convinced the Brooklyn DA’s Conviction Review Unit to open an investigation into Ramsey’s conviction, and then they got an unredacted version of the arrest report that his trial attorney had never seen.

The arrest report revealed that a police officer had stopped Cole Coleman and his brother DeWayne Coleman within an hour after the murder because they fit a description of Green’s killers given to a 911 operator.

They also discovered other documents including a detective’s interviews of the Coleman brothers.

According to the motion, the CRU interviewed Cole Coleman and he confirmed that his brother had been his accomplice during the Green murder and said that Ramsey had nothing to do with it.

“Why are you looking into this? Everyone, even the cops, know Ramsey wasn’t there,” Coleman told investigators, according to the motion.

The motion contends that Coleman said he lied because he didn’t want his mother left alone if both her sons went to prison, and that he named Ramsey because he was angry with him for dating a woman Coleman liked.

According to the motion, the CRU found problems with the single witness, Thomas Dale, whose testimony led to Ramsey’s conviction, including that Dale tried to get other witnesses to not cooperate with police.

CRU acknowledged that the arrest report should have been turned over, but refused to recommend Ramsey’s conviction be overturned.

“It was extremely disappointing and frustrating to learn of CRU’s decision not to recommend overturning Ramsey’s case after waiting nearly two years for their determination,” Phemister said. “This case is the very definition of a wrongful conviction.”

As Ramsey pressed his innocence, he partnered with an old friend, retired NYPD detective Tanya Williams, 55, to start Liberty Investigations, a private investigation business specializing in wrongful convictions.

Williams says she became a police officer because of what happened to Ramsey and to one of her brothers, who she said had also been wrongly convicted. “I always wanted to know what gave them the authority to do what they did,” she said. “I took pride in the job and gave it a different spin and I now actually encourage people to go into the NYPD.”

Williams calls Ramsey’s story “heart-wrenching.” “You can’t get the time back,” she says. “I think of the things he had to go through and for what. I don’t know how people can live with themselves.”

Ramsey threw himself into life on the outside. In addition to his private investigation business, he visits his 83-year-old mother every day.

Phemister recalls showing Ramsey his first Walmart, which didn't exist in 1981. "I remember watching the expression on his face in the giant store," he said. "That was eye opening. He had never been in one."

Ramsey admits that he is still watchful and edgy in public, for instance, when waiters frequently come to his table in a restaurant. "I took me awhile to adjust to this," he said. "In prison, when you walk up to a table, you gotta announce yourself before you get there."

In April 2018, he met Naomi Braithewaite, a 38-year-old friend of a friend. They started dating and were married in October 2018 outside Phemister's Midtown offices. The lawyer presided.

"I thought he was a nice guy," Braithewaite says. "I couldn't picture him in that situation (prison). I've told him a few times that someone who came from where he came from, it amazes me that he can be so positive."

Ramsey says he still dreams about prison. "Recently I was awake in the middle of the night," he said. "My wife asked me why. I told her I was dreaming about prison, but any dream about prison is a nightmare."

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