



Department of Emergency Services & Public Protection

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JAMES C. TILMANN HONORED AT FORENSIC LAB CEREMONY

MERIDEN -- James C. Tillman, who spent 16 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit, came to Connecticut's forensic lab with a message of thanks and a deep belief in the importance of science.

"I lived a life unimaginable for some people," Tillman told a gathering marking National Forensic Science Week at the state's forensic lab in Meriden. "I always wanted to come here. This was on my bucket list to be here. This is where it all happened."

"I thank law enforcement for their job. I know things don't go the way they are supposed to go all the time, but through science it makes it easier for them to get it right," Tillman said at a ceremony at the forensic lab on Sept. 13.

Tillman was convicted on sexual assault and kidnapping charges in 1989, but was released from prison in 2006 with help from the Connecticut Innocence Project and after advanced DNA testing exonerated him. Tillman's visit to the forensic lab was a chance for Tillman and scientists from the Division of Scientific Services to meet for the first time.

"Advanced DNA testing proved that he could not have committed that crime," said Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection Commissioner Ronnell A. Higgins. "I am renewed by our belief in the highest standards – and the best science – as we work every day to analyze evidence and provide the best investigative leads we can to our law enforcement officers."

"The Division of Scientific Services and the scientists at the forensic lab are committed to the best science, no matter where it takes us. Improved DNA testing is just one dramatic example that is transforming forensic science," Higgins said. "We must dedicate ourselves so that never again will a Connecticut citizen face what Mr. Tillman endured."

Over the last decade, the forensic lab has eliminated a 12,000 case backlog while cutting the turnaround time for investigating cases from 2 and a half years to under 60 days. A "Rapid DNA" program provides round-the-clock access for police investigators. Lab analysts use forensic genealogy and DNA to help solve decades-old cold crimes. Recently, the lab earned a perfect score on accreditation.

"We have really come a very long way in the use of science. DNA has enabled more justice to be done. Science has a role in achieving justice," said U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, who joined ceremonies at the forensic lab honoring Tillman and DNA research.

"DNA enables a jury to reach a conclusion that's based more in the truth than on bias or prejudice or the skill of the lawyers in the courtroom or the personality of the defendant," Blumenthal said. "Your dedication to science, to DNA, to making sure the system works as it should, is really so critically important."

Tillman, who said he spent years in prison feeling angry after his wrongful conviction, later found redemption when "I gave up the hatred that I had."

"I always wanted to come back to this lab and thank you all. I appreciate you guys. I am just glad to be here in Connecticut."

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