



▲ Sessoms met actor and civil rights advocate Danny Glover during an April symposium called “Connecting Art & Law for Liberation” held at UCLA.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF TIO SESSOMS

decision. Without Weaver to represent him, he said, a court-appointed attorney persuaded him to waive his right to a speedy trial.

“And the next thing you know, years go by,” Sessoms said.

The Sacramento County district attorney’s office said its Justice Training and Integrity Unit reviewed his case with higher-ups. “It is important to note at no time did Mr. Sessoms make a claim of ‘factual innocence’ and therefore that issue is not discussed in the appellate history,” the office said in a written statement.

The office said it decided to retry Sessoms, though it would have to do so without his statement to investigators and by relying on the 20-year-old memories of a couple of compromised witnesses. But the process would drag on for months, perhaps years. Sessoms didn’t want to wait, or roll the dice.

The DA’s office extended an offer: Plead no contest to manslaughter and burglary for time served. Sessoms took it.

“I didn’t want to take the damn deal because I didn’t do anything,” he said. “I didn’t have an advocate.”

The Justice Training and Integrity Unit formed in 2013 to examine claims of prosecutorial misconduct and wrongful conviction. In its statement to SN&R, the DA’s office said the unit has reviewed approximately 50 convictions and agreed to conduct DNA testing in at least one case, but hasn’t found any convictions that merit overturning.

It might not be looking hard enough.

The Northern California chapter of the Innocence Project, a nonprofit clinical program at the Santa Clara University School of Law, has successfully challenged more than two-dozen wrongful convictions since 2001, freeing 26 people who lost a total of 337 years to unjust imprisonment.

The exonerated include Zavion Johnson of Sacramento County, who was wrongfully convicted in 2002 of killing his 4-month-old daughter due to false medical expert testimony. Johnson, whose daughter slipped from his hands during a bath and struck her head on the tub, was released on December 2017. The DA’s office dropped all charges against him the following month.

The NorCal Innocence Project is working cases in 18 counties.

## YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE FREE

Sessoms had his hands full. He stiff-armed the coffeehouse door and hipchecked in the baby stroller.

His 3-month-old son, Tio Jr., slept. Tio Sr. sighed in relief.

Sessoms pulled dad duty. His wife had gone back to work. Sessoms showed a picture of her on his phone and grinned ear to ear. He’d known her since they were kids. They said their vows one year to the day Sessoms got out of jail on Oct. 5, 2017.

“You never forget the day you get out from a situation like this,” he said.

Since he’s been out, Sessoms has tried to be the advocate he needed as a young man. He has a YouTube channel where he breaks down the legal process and has been on something of a criminal justice reform tour. He has linked up with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition and California Families United 4 Justice, meeting civil rights luminaries in the process, including activist Cornel West and actor Danny Glover.

He also wrote another lawsuit, this one while stewing in county jail. This one alleging the cops never had a proper warrant to arrest him in the first place. The city of Sacramento declined to comment.

Sessoms may be free, but he isn’t done trying to clear his name. A manslaughter conviction is standing in the way of his next chapter: He said he wants to become a criminal defense attorney, the kind of lawyer he asked for two decades ago.

“I know the law based on studying it all those years in a cage,” Sessoms said.

Now he wants to try practicing it out of a cage. ■

An extended version of this story is available at [sacblog.newsreview.com](http://sacblog.newsreview.com)

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