

# After retirement, judge joins group that aids the wrongfully convicted

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By **Bridget Clerkin/The Times of Trenton**

**PRINCETON BOROUGH** — A local group dedicated to freeing innocent inmates from life sentences in prison will be getting the help of a high-profile ally for their cause.

Former New Jersey Supreme Court Justice Virginia Long has joined the board of directors of the Centurion Ministries, the Princeton organization dedicated to liberating prisoners from all over the country who have been wrongfully convicted. In its 29 years of operation, the group has successfully freed 49 inmates who served a collective 956 years behind bars for crimes they didn't commit.

Though they work toward the same goals, Centurion is not affiliated with the country-wide Innocence Project program.



Christina Izzo/The TimesVirginia Long, a Former NJ

Supreme Court Judge joins the Centurion Ministries

operation in Princeton

Long, who sat on the state's highest court for 13 years, said that she has followed the work of Centurion for some time and was happy to join the group after retiring from the bench in March.

"It struck me always," Long said of Centurion's cause. "I can't imagine how people wouldn't want to be involved in helping people who were wrongfully accused return to society."

Long said she was especially concerned with the large amount of eye-witness testimony that has put people behind bars over the years. Once considered "slam-dunk" evidence, the introduction of DNA verification has proven eyewitness testimony in recent years to be faulty and inaccurate, Long said.

"The testimony of an eyewitness is the most powerful testimony that can take place at a trial," she said. "When an eyewitness gets up there and says 'That's the person who did this to me,' it's overwhelming. But we know now thanks to DNA and other types of evidence that eyewitnesses are wrong a lot of the time."

She referred specifically to a case that Centurion is working on currently, where three young soldiers were convicted for the murder of a Savannah, Ga., man because the only eyewitness to the drive-by shooting said the soldiers' car "looked like" the one he saw that night. According to Centurion's report, the men lacked a motive for the crime and there was no way they could have been at the crime scene when the murder happened, but all three of them have been in prison for 19 years.

Still, she said the goal of eradicating the errors of the justice system was not at odds with the work she accomplished over more than three decades on the bench.

“As a judge, we are interested in the fairness of the judicial proceeding,” she said. “This organization is interested in the reality. What actually happened. Those are two very different focuses.”

Long explained that the work of a judge was bound by the letter of the law, especially concerning which types of evidence can or cannot be included in a trial and whether the jury should be informed of certain facts or instructed to disregard certain statements.

The work of Centurion, on the other hand, focuses on “time, distance — all kinds of things that would’ve made it impossible for a person to get from point A to point B,” Long said. “It’s more fact-based. For judges, it’s law-based.”

In her role on the board of directors, Long will examine ways in which her current law firm, Fox Rothschild, can help participate in the intricate investigations Centurion conducts to help build the case for freeing inmates. The work done by Fox Rothschild would be pro bono, Long said.

“We’re thrilled to have her on our board,” Centurion executive director James McCloskey said. “It really gives us a lift-up with prestige in the criminal justice system. When we go to various prosecutors’ offices, even across the country, advocating for the release of people convicted by that office years ago, she could be great to at least help influence them to open up that process.”

Long, 70, has been a champion of people who faced hefty penalties that may have been unjust.

She has previously said that she considers her opinions in death penalty cases to be among her most important.

On the Supreme Court, she consistently voted against the death penalty — many times as the only justice dissenting — saying she couldn't justify the disparity of death sentences for people who committed similar crimes. "It was the randomness of the application that was constantly bothering me," she said.

New Jersey lawmakers repealed the state's capital punishment law in 2007. The state has not executed anyone since 1963.

*Contact Bridget Clerkin at (609) 989-5680 or [bclerkin@njtimes.com](mailto:bclerkin@njtimes.com)*

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