Why would a wealthy businessman walk away from money and comfort to devote his life to freeing wrongly convicted prisoners? Jim McCloskey has his reasons—and a surprising record of success.

By Neal Gabler

Photography by Marius Bugge
Jackson had been gunned down three months earlier, the victim of a drive-by shooting. A 35-year-old drug addict named Ricky Jivens was convicted of the murder, but his case was marked by missing evidence and a history of racial prejudice. The trial was short, and the jury was out only a few hours later. The defendants were declared guilty before the trial even began. All were denied. The boys' families stayed in touch for a while, but it was over. They never saw each other again. McCloskey is the founder and executive director of Centurion Ministries, which is dedicated to freeing the wrongly convicted. Dominic Lucci wrote Centurion in 2000, trying to enlist its help, and then again in 2003, insisting he wouldn't take no for an answer. Lucci couldn't have known that getting Centurion to take a case is a little like winning the Powerball lottery. Centurion receives 1,100 requests from prisoners each year and selects only one to three cases to advocate. Each request is examined by Centurion's small staff to see if the defendant is a pretty good hope to have. McCloskey is the founder and executive director of Centurion Ministries, which is dedicated to freeing the wrongly convicted. Dominic Lucci wrote Centurion in 2000, trying to enlist its help, and then again in 2003, insisting he wouldn't take no for an answer. Lucci couldn't have known that getting Centurion to take a case is a little like winning the Powerball lottery. Centurion receives 1,100 requests from prisoners each year and selects only one to three cases to advocate. Each request is examined by Centurion's small staff to see if the defendant is a pretty good hope to have.
Jackson had been gunned down in a drive-by shooting, and she had in tow the only eyewitness to the crime: James White, a 58-year-old evangelical preacher who was entering his home when Jackson was killed in a nearby intersection. White told the officer that the car carrying Jones, Gardiner and Lucci “looked like” the car he had seen speeding away. Shortly afterward the three were pulled from the strip club and lined up against a wall, where White said, “That’s what they were wearing.” They were then brought to the Barracks. Burgett got a call from Jones at about two A.M., telling her he had been arrested. After a visit to the jail, she returned to the chapel later that morning and posted a sign on the door: WEDDING OF DAWN BURGITT AND MARK JONES CANCELLED DUE TO FAMILY EMERGENCY.

It was a short trial. At the time, Savannah was a racial cauldron due largely to a violent drug gang headed by a sociopath named Ricky Jivens. The city’s new mayor, who had taken office just weeks before Jackson’s death, had been elected with a substantial black vote on a platform of crime prevention, and the prosecution of three white soldiers for the murder of a black man helped fulfill his promise of racial evenhandedness.

At trial the defendants adduced a “time alibi”—they couldn’t possibly have gotten from Hinesville to Savannah in time to commit the murder, much less pick up AK-47s, the weapons with which Jackson had presumably been killed. There was absolutely no forensic evidence connecting them to the crime, save a trace of gunshot residue on the back of Jones’s hand that was explained away by his having moved gear that had been on the gunnery range earlier that day. But the prosecutor said they had motive. He claimed the three were addicts of the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons and had tried to actualize the game by slaying an “evil” person. Adding a second motive, he brought a member of Jones’s outfit to the stand to say Jones had threatened to kill a black man that weekend, even though none of the defendants had a history of violence or racial prejudice. And then there was James White, who had identified the men as the perpetrators. The jury was out only a few hours before returning a guilty verdict. The three were sentenced to life.

The boys’ attorneys filed appeals.

McCloskey is not only their last hope, he is their only hope.
prisoner qualifies for the group’s assistance. Does he profess innocence rather than invoke a legal technicality? Have his appeals been exhausted? Is the prisoner indigent? Only after answering these in the affirmative does the staff delve into the trial record. In the case of the Savannah Three, this selection process alone took nearly six years, and it ended, as all selection processes end, with McCloskey going to the prisons and interviewing the convicts at length to determine not only whether they are innocent but also whether they are “good people,” people who would live a productive life if released.

As long as the selection process takes, the process of trying to gain a prisoner’s freedom usually takes even longer—typically five to 10 years, during which the prisoners are still incarcerated, still doing time for crimes McCloskey is convinced they did not commit. Sometimes it is a matter of gaining an acquittal through a retrial, sometimes a matter of gaining freedom via parole, sometimes a matter of having a conviction reversed through an evidentiary hearing at which new evidence is introduced and a judge renders a verdict, which is what McCloskey won in that McRae courtroom for the Savannah Three. The good news is that in its 33 years of existence, CM has worked on 87 cases and won 51 releases, an astonishing record when one considers that once a person is convicted, there is a presumption of guilt, not of innocence. On average, each CM client had spent more than 20 years in jail.

And there is something else about Centurion that makes these numbers even more remarkable. Although it is hardly the only group dedicated to reversing wrongful convictions—there are some 75 “innocence projects” in America today—nearly all these organizations concentrate exclusively on exculpatory DNA evidence. McCloskey admits DNA is now so popular with courts that non-DNA cases are practically orphans. Centurion doesn’t forswear DNA if it is available, but it specializes in

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non-DNA cases like the Savannah Three's, cases that rely on shoe leather and old-fashioned investigation rather than a single lab test. In short, Centurion takes the very toughest cases.

Even so, CM's reputation is now so sterling that courts sometimes give its cases special attention. Lawyers who are chosen to work with CM, usually at less than half their normal fees, take great pride in doing so. 60 Minutes has featured three of CM's cases on its show, and one of those segments was largely responsible for gaining a prisoner parole. Television and movies have come calling, but McCloskey dismissed them when a scriptwriter had him interrogating a witness and then winding up in bed with her, and in any case, McCloskey says he doesn't have the time to fool with entertainment.

What keeps Jim McCloskey going for long days at his Princeton, New Jersey headquarters and in a grind in which he spends nearly half his life on the road, often in the bleakest American backwaters, is not the search for notoriety. It is an awful knowledge he bears: He knows the justice system is often corrupt. He knows police and prosecutors and witnesses sometimes lie to get convictions. He knows innocent men are spending their lives behind bars, even when the system realizes they are innocent. He knows that, despite the presumption of innocence, most people—most jurors—have such faith in law enforcement and prosecutorial judgment that there is often a presumption of guilt instead. More specifically, he knows the Savannah Three are innocent. "I have never encountered a case where it was so obvious that one man, let alone three, were arrested without any credible evidence and were convicted," he says.

So McCloskey headed down to Savannah, as he had headed into so many communities before, to free them. But he also headed down to save himself as much as to save them.

The journey that took Jim McCloskey to prisons and courtrooms was a long and often dark one, though to look at him he hardly seems like the kind of guy who, as kind looking, the sort of guy who makes friends as Matt, after the family patriarch. The only shadow on the family arrived in 1947, when Jim was five. His mother took to her bed one Friday with flu-like symptoms and awoke on Sunday paralyzed by polio. The night she was diagnosed, Jim's father, who never drank, got drunk. It was the last time the family let its spirits flag.

He attended Haverford High School, in a Philadelphia suburb, where despite being small and spindly he was a decent athlete, though he still had to run by where he had cheked by with a dream of becoming a successful business executive, the same dream harbored by just about all his friends and frat brothers. What his best friend in college, Joe Elliott, remembers is that McCloskey was always the class jester. McCloskey admits, "I wanted to be the center of attention. I wanted to be liked. I would do anything to get a laugh."

But McCloskey was a good student; class-mates, McCloskey was suffering an internal crisis. He realized he had wanted so badly to be accepted, to conform to the group, that he had lost his identity. He had become, as he now puts it, "inauthentic." So he made a resolution—a lifelong resolution. He determined that henceforth he was going to be "my own man." That's why he gave up his business aspirations and did something that baffled his friends. He joined the Navy at the very time the war in Vietnam was raging. The Navy, to his classmates' surprise, had him interrogating a witness and then joining the Centurion staff in 1970 to work a California case, the first of many, and then joined the Centurion staff in 1996 and worked there until his retirement in 2011. Henderson and McCloskey often took to the field together, tracking down witnesses and knocking on doors, and they did so again in the Savannah case.

Of course many of those witnesses had no desire to talk with McCloskey, so he had to use subterfuge. He befriended a former Savannah policeman who had served time for protecting drug dealers and got permission from him to use his name when he approached other policemen. That's how McCloskey gained access to the original investigating officer of the Savannah Three, Harvey Middleton, whom McCloskey tracked down in Miami Beach, where Middleton was working as a cop. McCloskey found the woman who had testified about Jones's desire to kill a black man, in a small town in North Carolina. He found a cab-driver who had seen the three arrive at Tops, the club's bouncer, fellow soldiers from their outfit, even a waitress from the Golden Corral. In one two-week period alone he drove 2,100 miles, crisscrossing Georgia, North Carolina and Florida.

In many ways McCloskey is an anomaly—an old-fashioned investigator in a newfangled age. He never uses a computer. When he does fly, he sometimes drives an inte- rior car, which he later pulls to the side of the road and writes meticulous notes. He is studiously organized. "Deliberate and organized to the teeth" is how Paul Henderson describes him, so that even his toiletries are neatly laid out in his hotel bathroom. He is notoriously fearless, usually showing up at a witness’s house unannounced. Nothing stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus- band stops him, not even when a witness’s hus-

The Savannah Three, McCloskey and Henderson had done their due diligence, whitling their list of interviewees to 22 witnesses they believed the eviden-

y was based on. But there were was one witness they had yet to find: the Reverend James White. In December 2009, McCloskey flew to Georgia and talked to White's friends, his relatives, his former neighbors, even his fellow preachers, leaving his card behind when they said they didn't know where White was but never telling them why he wanted to find him. Sev-

eral weeks passed. Then, on December 23, McCloskey got a call. "Do I know your name?" White asked, thinking McCloskey might be a bill collector. McCloskey explained that he was researching the Savannah Three case. White told him to call back after the holidays. McCloskey did White one better. That January he again flew down to Georgia, where a former pastor of White's told him White and his wife were homeless and living in a Super 8 motel in White's old hometown of Newnan. McCloskey spotted them in the motel parking lot, drove back in an hour (McCloskey staked out the hotel from the McDonald's next door), then sat down with White and his wife, Suzette, who "sagged" when McCloskey introduced himself and mentioned the crime. They talked mainly about Scripture, not the Sav-

annah Three. "He was so kind," White later said. "I felt free to talk to him."

What McCloskey did not know is that James White had been, in White's words, a "haunted" man ever since the Savannah Three trial. He had seen the perpetrators for only five seconds at most, at a distance of more than 70 feet, at an intersection in the dark of night lit only by a single streetlamp. He had initially identified
McCloskey now insisted that the company that confined him to a wheelchair. “I’m sick because I done worry myself to death,” he said. White and Suzette agreed to lunch in March to continue their investigation. The witness claimed to have received 600 pages of documents about the crime scene. The witness testified that at a distance of 72 feet—the distance at which White had been a young black officer on his first duty and couldn’t. As the days passed, the witness claimed to have had 24 hours, 25 of them signed “confessions.” “It was,” he says, “my first lesson in how easily the spirit could be broken.” McCloskey finally got the notarized affidavit that would provide the spark for the evidentiary hearing, still more than two years away. “See, I told you Jim would find us,” Suzette said when he handed them the signature page. McCloskey pulled out the phone and dialed White for a photograph, which they did. But it wasn’t easy for him to make that admission, especially since he felt he was sharing a location with others. He had told someone in Y aroki, but there wasn’t a deep, gravelly voice like a rhythm-and-blues singer, they were held “prisoner” in black boxes by the police and the prosecution had no positive IDs or any identifying characteristics of the perpetrators wearing headgear. It was while he was par- trooling the Savannah waters, McCloskey says, seeing our allies drinking and threatening to kill blacks after the war. That obscured their faces and with only one weapon in their possession, they were in a no-win situation, he said. But no one from the police or the prosecu- tion had bothered to give this report to the defense attorneys before the trial, so it re- mained buried in the file until McCloskey unburied it. In short, apparently other men were roaming Savannah’s streets that night, and these men had ill intent.

When McCloskey joined the Navy in 1964, he asked to be posted to Japan because, he says, he had once seen a short film on Tokyo nightlife and was very much in love with her. He spent 18 months as a communications of- ficer in Yokosuka and another year head- ing a transmitter detail in Tsubuo ku. But it wasn’t so much the service that af- fected his life as the romance. At the PX in Yokosuka, he met Miyoshi (not her real name), a beautiful Japanese girl, and, he says, “something just clicked. I absolutely fell in love with her.” Within a month he was living at her house off-base. She would bathe him, teach him sexual secrets, and travel with the country with him. For the first time in his life, he thought about marriage. Then he married her, she went to the United States for a 30-day tour. On the night she was leav- ing, he called her tearfully from the dock and asked that she come see him. He was on duty and couldn’t. As the days passed, McCloskey tried to contact once, they told the States, to no avail. When the month was over and she hadn’t returned, McCloskey, distraught, went to see her mother, who gave him shaming news: The girl had been found dead, and her mother had left the service, and she had gone to America to marry him. “I was absolutely devastated, crushed,” he says. “I’ve never been so bleak and dark in my life.” Even now he has a fractured face from the woman who called the love of his life.

Trying to heal, he took up with another Japanese woman, who followed him to Toksua, but there wasn’t the same ardor, and he had to accept the fact that he had left the service. “I was devastated,” he says, “to go to America to marry him, and then my wife died. I had a gold squgle over the right breast, a purple tie and white loafers. He is a huge man, and nearly 300 pounds, and he had to carry his weight with terrific results. To see him was like watching a cat with a crowd of bitches. He [White] had discovered that White’s identification and that White’s identification had mysteriously become more precise over time, from a possibility to a certainty. It was, he said, “highly unlikely that the two [McCloskey and Jones] would have been confused.” This was White’s testimony, on which the entire conviction rested.

Then came the defense attorneys from the Savannah police, who had held the petitioners “prisoner” in black boxes by the police and the sugars by the prosecution for decades. And he was growing bored with his sta- ficer in Y aroki, he met Miyoshi (not her real name), a beautiful Japanese girl, and, he says, “something just clicked. I absolutely fell in love with her.” Within a month he was living at her house off-base. She would bathe him, teach him sexual secrets, and travel with the country with him. For the first time in his life, he thought about marriage. Then he married her, she went to the United States for a 30-day tour. On the night she was leav- ing, he called her tearfully from the dock and asked that she come see him. He was on duty and couldn’t. As the days passed, McCloskey tried to contact once, they told the States, to no avail. When the month was over and she hadn’t returned, McCloskey, distraught, went to see her mother, who gave him shaming news: The girl had been found dead, and her mother had left the service, and she had gone to America to marry him. “I was absolutely devastated, crushed,” he says. “I’ve never been so bleak and dark in my life.” Even now he has a fractured face from the woman who called the love of his life.

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McCluskey insisted she get an abortion, which she did. And then, bailed by guilt, he went to Vietnam. He never came back.

Vietnam taught him two lessons. During training at Camp Pendleton in California before he left for Vietnam and 125 of his fellow sailors engaged in an exercise in which they were held ‘prisoner’ in black boxes by a group of white men. He knew they would be released in 24 hours, 25 of them.

“Jim said that one thing was clear: ‘It was,’ says McCluskey, ‘my first lesson in how easily the spirit could be broken,’ which is why he doubts confessions now. When he landed in Vietnam in October 1967, he became an electronic engineer to the South Vietnamese junk fleet. And there came the second lesson. It was while he was patrolling Vietnamese waters, McCluskey says, seeing our allies Viet Cong captives and our own military infrastructural bodies, that he came first to doubt authority. Despite his disillusionment, he received a Bronze Star. Then he left the service, with very little money, to avoid being wanted to do next to no white man. It was still the same, and when he had joined, the journey had only begun.

The evidentiary hearing for the Savannah Three was held at the Telfair County courthouse, Telfair County. It was a trial that grows prisons.

The keys were there, along with Jones’s half-brother, Dominic Luci’s uncle, Dave Burnett and two of her old friends. According to their testimony that one was black, looking older, richer, more handsome, and in Jones’s case, a very thin boy, they had been the main event of that first session was the testimony of James White, who was whored to the stand wearing a polo shirt white with a gold squash over the right breast, a purple tie and white loafers. He was a huge man with a very thick neck, no necklace, and a deep, gravelly voice like a rhythm-and-blues singer, which is what he was before he found religion. And now, publicly, he admitted, “I lied about certain things,” but insistently maintained that he saw no weapons and that the police and the prosecutors at his misgivings about identifying them. They insisted, he claimed, threatening him with perjury that obscured their faces and with only a few seconds before they sped away, it would have been “humane impossible” for White to have seen the murderers. A psychologist from Emory University added that “post-event factors,” including television coverage, might have affected White’s identification and that White’s identification had historically been more precise over time, from a possibility to a certainty. It was, he said, “highly unlikely that [White] could make a satisfactory identification.” Thus was James White’s testimony, on which the entire conviction depended, put on alert should the Savannah Three be released in 24 hours, all in all, it was a good day for the prisoners and a good day for Jim McCluskey.

Back in 1967, out of the Navy and at loose ends, he moved to Glendale, Arizona, he missed America. So back he went to Philadelphia, living with his divorced brother and hunting for a job. He got one with another consulting firm

“Didn’t Helen used to wear underwear?”

[Image 22x52 to 376x482]
called the Hay Group, again largely advis-
ing American businesses wanting to make
inroads in Japan, and he was successful.
But he knew this was not the life he had
promised himself when he made his gradu-
ation resolution at Bucknell. He says he felt
hollow inside. He even started to attend
church for the first time since childhood,
looking for an answer to his malaise. And
he kept being reminded of a Japanese ad-
age: The nail that sticks out gets hammered
down. McCloskey wanted to be that nail.
He was a lost man, a broken man. Noth-
ing fulfilled him. Though he mentioned it
to no one, he began reading Scripture, and
one day his eye was drawn randomly to a page in the Bible and found Jesus's last
words to Peter: "When you were young,
you walked where you would. When you are
older, another will take you, perhaps
where you don't want to go." It came as a
revelation. Knowing he was going where he
didn't want to go, he walked into the
office on Monday morning and resigned.
His boss convinced him to stay another
year. McCloskey felt he had finally found
himself. More startling, he decided to enroll
in the Princeton Theological Seminary and
become a Presbyterian minister.
It wasn't your typical religious
conversion. He threw a going-away party
for himself and hired two strippers, and
there was always a bottle of Jack Daniel's
on his dormitory windowsill. And he wasn't
your typical seminarian. In the second year,
each student had to choose fieldwork, and
McCloskey, trying to be that nail, decided
to go to prison—against a hospital or a church, which is
where most students wound up. He chose
Trenton State Prison and not only Trenton
State but its "Vroom" wing, where the
behavior problems were housed. It was
ugly—his introduction was a prisoner who
screamed invectives at him—but he felt
exhilarated. On the first day he entered the
tier, in the fall of 1980, a junkie and lifer
named Jorge De Los Santos, with long hair
and wearing only boxer shorts, approached
him and professed his innocence of the
murder he was convicted of. Nicknamed
Chiefie because he had been a leader in the
Newark projects where he'd lived, De Los
Santos told McCloskey that he had been
framed but that he, McCloskey, had
shouldered the blame. Chiefie begged
Delli Santi, who testified that De Los Santos
had confessed in jail. Chiefie begged
McCloskey to look into
the wunderkind named Jay Regan, who had
his own scrape with a wrongful conviction.
In 1989 Regan, the managing partner of
a hedge fund named Princeton/Newport
Partners, was tried for stock fraud by then
U.S. attorney Rudy Giuliani, convicted and
sentenced to six months in prison. Three
years later, the conviction was overturned,
and Regan, with firsthand experience of
how the system can malfunction, sought
out McCloskey to help CM raise funds by
introducing him to some of his contacts. One
of them, Edward Stern, a real estate magnate
whose family had owned the Hartz
Mountain pet company, has put up nearly
all the money for the Savannah Three
case—the investigation and legal proceed-
ing of which have cost $363,000.
There was a time when CM might not
have survived McCloskey. After a bout
with prostate cancer in 2008 ("It slowed
me down for two weeks or so," he says)
and a heart attack in 2012, McCloskey has
drawn up a succession plan, though he
doesn't contemplate stepping down un-
til he is at least 75. CM has just hired a
new investigator, as well as a development
director, Nick O'Connell, who is the son

It wasn't your typical religious conversion. McCloskey threw a going-away party for himself and hired two strippers, and there was always a bottle of Jack Daniel's.

Mark Jones had told her on the morning of January 31 that he was going to kill a black man. (It turned out Jones wasn't even on the base January 31.) Two career Army men testified that Wallace had given them conflicting accounts of Jones's statement, and a longtime soldier and Hinesville police-
man testified that Wallace had dissembled
when she said she had approached him
to tell him about Jones's intent. "She lied
completely about everything," he said. Yet
another witness, an Army friend of Jones's,
said the prosecution had pressured him to
say Jones was a racist even though Jones
had never made a racist statement to him.
If Jones had, the friend said, he would
have reported him to his superiors.

After a lifetime of doubt and dissatisfaction, McCloskey said, it all came together for him
in 1985. He had graduated from Princeton
Theological Seminary, Chiefie had been
freed, and through Chiefie he had met two
other lifers who professed their innocence
and asked for his help. And then he had a
dream. He was on a riverbank in Vietnam,
watching a boat crowded with people, and
the boat began to sink. Out of the blue, a
helicopter arrived and rescued the pas-
sengers. McCloskey took it as an omen: He
was ordained to rescue others.
He took on the cases of Chiefie's two
lifers and the case of a third prisoner—all
of whom were eventually freed. He had no money but got free housing from Mrs. Yeatman—he laughs and says
he's the only person who chose to live in
Princeton because it was halfway between
Trenton State Prison and Rahway State
Prison—and he was getting donations
from his church and from old high school
and college friends. He said he was
driving to a law firm to set up a nonprofit
organization to raise money when the name came to him. He would
call his group Centurion after the Roman
soldier who declared at the foot of Jesus's
cross, "Surely this one is innocent."

For the next five years McCloskey made it
up as he went along. He drove a 1975 VW
Rabbit and earned between $6,000 and
$7,000 a year. In fact, he was Centurion's
only employee. But the prisoner releases
at Centurion generated attention—and letters from contacts began to pour
in. There was one letter, not from a pris-
oner but from a woman who had recently
moved from California to Connecticut;
she had read about Centurion and wanted
to help. Her name was Kate Germond,
and she wound up volunteering to sit in
McCloskey's room in Mrs. Yeatman's house
and triage the letters he got. That was in
1986. Twenty-seven years later she is still
at Centurion, now as a Centurion partner,
and it is she as much as anyone who brings
the cases to McCloskey's attention as well
as taking on cases of her own. Essentially, they
split the primary workload.

Centurion has come a long way since
Chiefie. These days there is a new office
in Princeton, a staff of eight and an annual
budget of $1.25 million for the 19 active
cases that CM is investigating. A lot of that
money is raised by a onetime Wall Street
wunderkind named Jay Regan, who had
his own scrape with a wrongful conviction.
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ing of which have cost $363,000.
of recent CM exoneree Frank O'Connell. One could say things have never looked so rosy—save for one thing.

On the last day of the evidentiary hearing, David Lock took the stand. Lock had been the prosecutor of the Savannah Three case, and he was clearly invested in their guilt. Lock looked like a pompous Southern lawyer: the beige seersucker suit, the jowls and potbelly, the red Vandyke and the glasses. He sounded like one too, with a basso voice basted in a deep Southern accent. But as Centurion attorney Peter Camiel began his examination, Lock quickly began to wilt, smiling unpromptingly, even at one point twirling in his chair so his back was to the observers. Lock insisted he had never pressured White, that White had told him he could identify the defendants as the murderers, though that ID was not essential to his case, that the Herron memo was "extraneous" to the case and that the reason Ken Gardiner's car contained virtually no gunshot residue was because the weapons were fired out the window. But he also admitted there was no forensic evidence and that he might have overplayed the Dungeons & Dragons motive, which left no motive whatsoever. By the time Lock's testimony ended, at 11:52 that morning, Centurion was pretty sure it had proved its case.

That didn't answer the question of who killed Stanley Jackson that January night in 1992. When it investigates, Centurion always tries to find the actual perpetrators, and in 12 of its 51 cases it has. The Savannah Three case, however, was tough, in part because several people had motives. By one account, Jackson's stepson had threatened to kill Jackson after he'd beaten the boy's mother shortly before he was shot. And there was Jackson's cocaine habit. McCloskey speculated that Jackson might have been killed by the Jivens gang for welshing on drug payments, so he wrote to Sammy Lee Gadson, a Jivens enforcer who was serving a life sentence for murder in a federal medical facility in Springfield, Missouri. Gadson wrote back that the three were innocent, adding, "Everybody knows who did kill Stanley Jackson," but he refused to reveal the information for fear of retaliation. Gadson's younger brother, who was acquitted of murder, told McCloskey the same thing: "Those boys are innocent."

The reason the Centurion story doesn't have as happy an ending as one might imagine is Jim McCloskey himself. He is finally fulfilled, a broken man made whole. The abortion so many years ago still plagues him, as does another by a married woman with whom he'd had an affair, as well as his wayward behavior toward women and the years he wasted following the corporate path. Despite his many friends, he is lonely, and he knows he will never have a wife or family. He has a persistent dream that seems to summarize his situation: "I'm in a social setting with my friends, and nobody wants to talk to me. I'm on the outside...and when I go to talk to them, they disperse."

And something else troubles McCloskey—something that emanates from the very darkness of the human soul. Jim McCloskey's faith is shaken, which may just be an occupational hazard of living in a world of injustice. For four years he had investigated the conviction of a Virginia rapist named Roger Coleman and had concluded that Coleman hadn't committed the crime. Coleman's last words, scribbled to McCloskey on the night of his execution, were that he was innocent. McCloskey promised him he would continue to try to prove that. Ten years passed, during which time DNA testing had improved, and McCloskey got the state of Virginia to agree to a post-execution DNA test—the first in the country. He was manning the phone in November 2005 when the result came in: Coleman was guilty. McCloskey calmly met the press and admitted he had been wrong.

But it isn't Roger Coleman's lie that tests Jim McCloskey's faith. Coleman aside, Centurion's record for selecting the innocent is exceptional. In addition, only five of the 51 prisoners it has freed have returned to jail, none of them for a capital offense. (Alas, Chiefie was one of the recidivists; he went to jail for striking his wife and was later shot to death in a vacant lot in the Bronx.) What tests him is human nature—the willingness of policemen and prosecutors to frame men for so little gain against what the men have to lose—and what tests him is a God who would let these men languish in prison for crimes they did not commit. "My clarity in belief has failed to a certain extent," he says, "Does God care what happens in this world? And does God have influence on what happens, or is it just random?" And wondering, he cites the biblical dictum that the sun shines on both the good and the evil, and the rain comes down on both the just and unjust.

Which is all the more reason Centurion is necessary. The Savannah Three won't know their fate for months, until the judge renders her verdict and then, if she does overturn their conviction, until the Georgia Supreme Court decides whether to uphold her decision. Meanwhile, McCloskey is off to Montgomery, Alabama, where he is testifying before a parole board in the case of Billy Ray Davis, who has spent 29 years behind bars even though the police investigator for the case told McCloskey the evidence pointed to another man. The parole board waiting room is glum. The families, mostly black and poor, sit in T-shirts and polos, grim-faced and silent, waiting for their 10- or 15-minute shift to make their case. McCloskey testifies about Davis's upstandingness—like most Centurion clients he has a clean prison record—but the board quickly denies him parole, and McCloskey, his faith tested yet again, leaves for another investigation. Davis will have to wait another four years for a hearing.

Despite the disappointment, McCloskey will trudge on. "It's so hard to believe there's still somebody out there who's so incredibly honest and dedicated," says Mark Jones's mother. "How does he not get discouraged?" she wonders, not knowing he has. But then she answers her own question. "He has an effect on people," she says. "I don't know that it makes them better or makes them rethink their lives or whatever. He's had an effect on me." That may be it. In the end, Jim McCloskey, who once was lost and who even now questions his faith, has a strange power to bring redemption to a world desperately in need of it.

So he endures.