

Guests filled up a ballroom of the West Virginia University Erikson Alumni Center to support the West Virginia Innocence Project and their work.

Thursday, April 5, 2018 was the first annual Solidarity Ball, hosted by the West Virginia University Center for Black Culture and Research, the WVU Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and the WVU Department of Native American Studies. The Solidarity Ball honors a different organization each year, and this year the organizers chose to honor the work of the West Virginia Innocence Project. WVU College of Law student-attorneys work alongside director Valena Beety and Cleckley Fellow Nathan Maxwell to investigate and overturn wrongful convictions in West Virginia. The Solidarity Ball was free and open to the public.

WVU Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Meshea Poore, spoke on the role of students as leaders in our community and at WVU. “This wonderful collaboration allowed us to come together and stand united against injustice. Mr. Jackson's powerful message encouraged each of us to be better advocates for change understanding that every effort made mattered.” Marjorie Fuller, director of the WVU Center for Black Culture and Research introduced the West Virginia Innocence Project to the crowd.

Then while enjoying cocktails and appetizers that evening, guests listened to Rickey Jackson speak about his experience with wrongful conviction. Jackson was a young man living in Cleveland, Ohio when he was arrested and convicted for a murder he did not commit.

The case against Jackson hinged on the testimony of a local child who told police he saw Jackson and his friends commit the crime. Upon finding out that Jackson was to be tried for murder, the boy attempted to recant his testimony, but police threatened him into not recanting. Jackson was then convicted of capital murder and given the death sentence. He was sent to death row in Ohio.

Jackson's sentence was eventually commuted to life in prison. But, he still spent nearly four decades behind bars. That's considered to be the longest time a wrongfully convicted person has been incarcerated.

Jackson spoke about how being imprisoned affected him and his family. He tearfully said that he missed being able to grow up with his mother. She died while he was behind bars. Jackson then praised the work of the Ohio Innocence Project, which was able to exonerate him in 2014 after the boy who identified Jackson as the murderer finally recanted. Quite a few eyes in the crowd weren't dry by the time Jackson finished speaking.

Along with Jackson, Valena Beety, director of the West Virginia Innocence Project spoke about the importance of working to improve the criminal justice system.

After the speeches were over, the ballroom dance floor was cleared so guests could dance and mingle.

The West Virginia Innocence Project would like to thank all who attended and all who were generous enough to donate and the WVU Center for Black Culture and Research, the WVU

Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and the WVU Department of Native American Studies for hosting the gala. Support from the community is what allows their work to happen.