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Project gives inmates second chance

By [Madison Fleck](#)

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Each year, hundreds of inmates are wrongfully convicted of crimes they didn't commit and are forced to spend years in prison.

This year, the West Virginia University College of Law started the Innocence Project, which gives these inmates the freedom they rightfully deserve.

The Innocence Project is a program that gives third-year law students the opportunity to solve these cases free of charge.

"It's a really great experience," said David Estep, a third-year law student at WVU. "You can tell these inmates haven't really had anyone to listen to their story in a long time, and listening means a lot to them, because they're forgotten about at that point.

"They see us as someone that can offer them a voice."

The Innocence Projects accepts applications from inmates who have been in prison for large amounts of time, and if there is an actual innocence claim, they take on the case. The WVU project has received more than 150 applications this far and has many cases pending.

Estep said some of the applicants have been in prison for decades, but unfortunately, the Innocence Project can only accept applicants who have a valid claim to innocence.

"The most challenging part is probably making our way through the applications and having to reject certain cases," said Ashley Joseph, a third-year WVU law student involved with the Innocence Project.

The students thoroughly investigate the cases they undertake and send the evidence to experts to determine if a crime was actually committed.

"As good as our legal system is, there are still mistakes," Estep said. "We're all human, and we're going to make mistakes."

The law students involved with the project were chosen from a lottery, and only four were chosen this year.

"I was lucky enough to get in after someone ahead of me had dropped," Joseph said. "I want to be a criminal defense attorney, and whenever I heard we were starting an Innocence Project at WVU, I knew I could have an impact."

The students put much time and effort into the cases. Estep and his partner have already visited certain inmates several times to obtain the information needed.

"Our case is our baby," Estep said. "We're a little sad that we're going to be leaving at the end of the semester, because there is a little bit of that emotional investment."

Estep and the other student attorneys involved with the Innocence Project said they hope to give these inmates a voice.

"These people were shuffled under the carpet by society, and some of them didn't deserve it," Estep said. "By having this type of program, we are able to help people that are wrongfully convicted of these crimes."

For more information about the Innocence Project, visit [www.innocenceproject.org](#).

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