



Lauren Kaeseberg is a member of the Hinsdale South High School Class of 1998.

Lauren is the Legal Director of the Chicago office of the Illinois Innocence Project and has worked on the exoneration of close to a dozen innocent people – that is her proudest career accomplishment. *Walking someone out of the prison doors after they have been there, innocent, for decades is such a privilege and I am so proud of this work.* Lauren feels really lucky to have a career where she can help correct injustices in individual cases but also use those cases to make our criminal justice system better.

Some highlights include the exonerations of:

- Bill Amor (Bill spent 21 years in prison for a DuPage County arson murder he did not commit and was exonerated after a retrial we did earlier this year);
- Chris Abernathy (Chris was released in February 2015 after spending 30 years of a life sentence for a murder he did not commit – I directed and handled all legal matters leading to Abernathy’s exoneration after DNA testing done at my request proved he was innocent);
- Angel Gonzalez (who spent 21 years in prison for a rape he did not commit and who was released in March 2015);
- Bennie Starks (a case on which I worked as a law student in 2005 and stayed on as an attorney, finally helping to achieve exoneration in 2013 for his 1984 conviction);
- Kennedy Brewer (as a clinic student, I worked with experts and helped devise and conduct a forensic experiment disproving a bitemark theory, travelling to Mississippi to do so and this work contributed to the ultimate exoneration of Brewer and another man, Levon Brooks, both who had been on Death Row in Mississippi);
- Byron Halsey (a New Jersey case I worked on where Byron spent 24 years of a Life sentence in prison for the murder of his step-children and was ultimately freed by DNA).

Lauren told us that *There are many more, all important and life-changing, but these represent some highlights. Being able to see these men reunited with their families, lost to them for decades, has been one of the joys of my life.*

I started doing innocence work in law school (it was the reason I went to law school and why I chose Cardozo Law School – where the Innocence Project was started by Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld). Currently as a Legal Director at the Illinois Innocence Project, I also supervise other attorneys, work with and teach students and help oversee legal strategy for a large number of our cases.

Prior to the Illinois Innocence Project, from 2009-2013, I was a lawyer on the federal trials and appeal of Former Governor Rod Blagojevich – work which also makes me very proud. On the Blagojevich case, I handled our legal writing and litigation, questioned witnesses, drafted portions of the appeal and drafted a petition to the United States Supreme Court, among other duties. I did all of this under the microscope of a hostile judge and the media who were live-tweeting from the courtroom. I learned to navigate the media and was prominently featured on television and in print. I was the only woman on the defense team and was proud to hold my own in a male-dominated field, under high pressure. I learned a lot about myself and how to be a strong female attorney on that case – it was an incredible experience.

After Blagojevich, I was proud to work as an attorney on a number of other high-profile legal matters as well, including being a member of the defense team for the trial of Cook County Commissioner William Beavers in federal court. I have also worked on a number of appellate matters in state courts around the country as well as federal court and I have had oral arguments in front of esteemed panels of justices in the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals (obtaining a reversal of a sentence in one case, of which I was particularly proud).

Lauren's Recognition/Awards:

The 2016 Great Starts in District 61 Award

This is an award given to one person annually who attended District 61 schools and has gone on to do 'great' things. She was truly honored to receive this award and as part of the honor, she went around to the schools in District 61 and spoke to students about her work and career.

Recognitions

- As a leader in the area of wrongful convictions and forensics.
- She has been led or been featured in various "CLE" (Continuing Legal Education programs) and other educational courses including a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) and various programs with the Illinois State Bar Association and other groups.
- She was selected to do an online series for the ISBA entitled "Hot Topics in Criminal Law" and filmed a series on the causes of wrongful convictions.
- She has spoken before large university groups and law schools, as well as organizations like the ACLU, women's groups and others.
- She worked as an Adjunct Professor of Law and continues to work with law students.
- Participated on numerous panels that national Innocence Network conferences on topics ranging from working with prosecutors to investigations to issues affecting Latino inmates.
- Recognized in numerous media outlets for my work, including newspapers as well as interviews on major news outlets from NBC, ABC, WGN, WBEZ/NPR and also including full interview segments on Chicago Tonight on WTTW, Adelante Chicago, CBS2 and WUIS/NPR.
- Lauren is also proud of the various honors and awards she received in law school. However, she is most proud of being in the inaugural class of Public Service Scholars and being a Public Service Scholar for all 3 years and receiving the Cardozo Service & Achievement Award upon graduation.

Accomplishment most proud of

Holding someone's hand – literally and figuratively – as they step out of prison into freedom is an honor and an incredible feeling.

Lauren's legacy message to the students

Know that it's ok to grow, change and evolve – you should not be the same person when you finish high school as when you started. Take advantage of the opportunities that come your way because you never know what will strike you and become a passion. If you live your life being authentically yourself and you try to leave the world a better place, you'll be respected, and you'll be proud of yourself. Whether you love being a teenager or you hate being a teenager, it will all go by so fast – embrace this time when you can, try new things and figure out what you stand for, and what you want to do as an adult.