Rubin Carter: A Longshot Essay, Research Paper

“Here comes the story of the Hurricane”-Rubin Carter—the boxer, the man—who had justice stacked against him (Dylan, Bob). The question: What is justice? According to whose point of view? In the 1960s, were blacks treated fairly? Case in point—Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, a longshot, who was finally released from jail after 19 years of being wrongfully imprisoned for a crime he never committed.

Rubin Carter in no way has experienced an easy life. He was born on May 6, 1937, in Clifton, New Jersey. At the time, Clifton was a very controversial place to live. Blacks were being treated unfairly from birth because of the color of their skin. When he was about seven he moved with his family to Paterson.

At the young age of twelve, Carter was arrested and sent to a home for boys, called Jamesburg State Home for Boys, by the Paterson detectives. Because of this incident, the Paterson detectives already did not like him, so this would only make his situation in the future worse. The reason he went to the home was because he stabbed a man with a Boy Scout knife. Rubin claimed the man was a pedophile that was trying to molest his friend. He was to serve 6 years without early release from good behavior.

Before Carter’s term was up, he decided to escape. Rubin went from the boy’s home right into the army, where he joined the segregated corps. While in the Army he made some friends that liked boxing. Rubin started training daily and became very good.

In 1956 Carter returned to Paterson, where he had grown up, and was shortly arrested and taken to serve his 10 remaining months in a jail. Once he was released he was arrested again very shortly after for purse snatching; Rubin was to spend four years for that crime.

While in jail for that sentence, Carter continued training for boxing, as this helped to get out some of his anger. His lightning fast swing and “cat-like” reflexes earned him the nickname “Hurricane.” One night, after Rubin was released, he was at a nightclub mingling with some old friends. He was leaving late in the night, and was giving a ride to a man he had just met, John Artis.

On their way home, on the night of June 17th, 1966, they were pulled over by a white police officer and escorted to the scene of the crime, as they fit the possible description of the criminals they were looking for (two black men in a white car). Carter and Artis later learned that two black men had robbed and fatally shot three white people at Lafayette Bar and Grill in Paterson, NJ. They were then taken to a hospital where one surviving victim, who died later, said they weren’t the killers. John and Rubin are released and were “never suspects”.

Later in 1966, Alfred P. Bello, a well-known criminal and a suspect himself, gave the police a signed statement claiming he saw Carter and Artis at the murder scene. Carter and Artis were arrested and later indicted for the triple murders. An all-white jury convicted Carter and Artis. The prosecutor wanted them to receive the death penalty, but the jury recommended mercy. They were sentenced to three life terms.

While in jail, Carter wanted people to know more about him, and how he was innocent. In 1974 he wrote his autobiography called The Sixteenth Round, which was published by Viking Press. Around that time, Bello admitted that he never saw Artis or Carter at the scene of the crime, but Paterson detectives pressured him into lying. They gave him $10,000 and promised that they would let him off on pending robbery charges.

In 1975, Carter sent a copy of his book to musician Bob Dylan because of his commitment to the struggle of civil rights. After Dylan read the book, he came to the prison where Rubin was staying and talked with him. When he left he knew that Carter was innocent and also wanted to preach the truth. He wrote a song called “Hurricane” and it was all about Artis and Carter’s unfair trial.

In 1976 The New Jersey Supreme Court unanimously overturned the convictions, ruling that the prosecution withheld evidence favorable to the defense, and ordered a new trial. Carter and Artis were released on bail. After a second trial where the prosecution was allowed to argue for the first time that the murders were motivated by racial revenge, Carter and Artis were reconvicted and the same life sentences were imposed. They were sent back to prison.

In 1975 Judge H. Lee Sarokin of the Federal District Court in Newark, NJ, overturned the second trial convictions after finding that the prosecution committed violations against the constitution. When the prosecution heard this, they insisted that Rubin was dangerous and should remain in jail. Sarokin saw no signs of dangerousness in Carter and ordered him free without bail.

The side of the prosecution took its case to the United States Court of Appeals, and demanded that Carter be put back into jail. However, they found no reason to keep him in jail and he remained free. In 1988 all of Carter’s troubles were over, or at least he thought they were, when a Passaic County (NJ) state judge formally dismissed the 1966 indictments of Carter and Artis and finally ended the 22-year long saga.

Once he was released, Carter moved to Toronto, Ontario, Canada, where he lived with the group that had worked to free him. He worked with Swinton and Chaiton on a book, Lazarus and the Hurricane: The Untold Story of the Freeing of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, which was published in 1991. He and Peters got married, but the couple separated when Carter moved out of the commune.

The World Boxing Council gave Carter, who was a former prizefighter, an honorary championship title belt in 1993. He now serves as director of the Association in Defense of the Wrongfully Convicted, headquartered in his house in Toronto. He also serves as a member of the board of directors of the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta and the Alliance for Prison Justice in Boston.

In 1996 Carter was arrested and taken into custody by Toronto narcotics officers who were searching for a cocaine dealer who had sold to an undercover cop. The police called it a “case of mistaken identity,” and said they would pay for the damage done to his car during the search. The “Hurricane,” who spent 19 years in jail last time he was wrongfully arrested, was extremely angry. “I am so furious that what happened simply because I was wearing a jacket and I am black he said after his release (Personal Interview).

In 1999, the ultimate tribute possible was made to him. The movie, The Hurricane, directed by Norman Jewison and starring Denzel Washington, was a story of the unfair struggles Rubin was put through. The movie was mainly based on Carter’s autobiography and the book written by Swinton and Chaiton. In 2000 yet another book was written about the Hurricane. It was an authorized autobiography by James S. Hirsch, called Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter.

The struggles of Rubin Carter have proven that not everyone is treated fairly. What happened to Carter was a shame, and should never happen again; but the sad part is that it will. The prosecution in the case knew they were wrong, but they would rather do their job and put an innocent man in jail, rather that lose their job, but save a great part of an innocent man’s life. In the future it will happen again whether it’s because of religion, race, sex, or anything, people will be prosecuted unfairly.