MORTON: ‘I OWE A LOT OF PEOPLE MY LIFE’

Michael Morton is savoring 5th anniversary of freedom

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TOP: Michael Morton drives his boat as he seeks a place to fish Friday morning in East Texas.

ABOVE: Morton (right) soaks in the sunshine with his attorney, John Raley, as he leaves the courthouse on Oct. 4, 2011 — the day he was released after serving nearly 25 years following a wrongful conviction in his wife’s death. PHOTOS BY RICARDO B. BRAZZIELL / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Morton checks his cellphone before heading out to fish. He has remarried — finding a soft-spoken, iron-willed sidekick — and became a father again to the son he lost while in prison.
Morton, making coffee at home, plans a quiet dinner with his wife on his fifth "Freedom Day."

Morton, casting on the lake, says he had a to-do list before entering prison. But no longer. "You would expect Michael to be really angry, vengeful, bitter. But he changed," his wife says. "He came to a place where he was able to let all that go."
Morton looks for fish bait early Friday. He’s not sure how long people will be interested in hearing his story.

Michael Morton enjoys the “therapeutic element” of fishing in the lake next to his East Texas home. PHOTOS BY RICARDO B. BRAZZIELL / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

When Michael Morton celebrates “Freedom Day” on Tuesday — the fifth anniversary of his walk into the sunshine as a free man, unbroken by almost 25 years in prison — there will be one more name on the list of those he quietly thanks every Oct. 4.

“I owe,” he said, “a lot of people my life.”

There are the lawyers who believed in him and eventually proved he was innocent of his wife’s 1986 murder.

There are the family members and friends who never lost faith in him.

And now there is Jennifer Smith, the evidence supervisor for the Williamson County Sheriff’s Office, who diligently searched for a misplaced piece of evidence — a blood-stained, blue bandanna with DNA evidence that would get Morton out of prison, solve his wife’s murder and, most recently, solve a second murder in Austin.

Morton learned about Smith’s contribution when she testified at last month’s trial of Mark Alan Norwood for the 1988 murder of Debra Baker in North Austin, helping to link Norwood’s DNA to the slayings. Morton was in the audience, providing what comfort he could for Baker’s family, who did the same for him when Norwood was tried and convicted in 2013 for the murder of Morton’s wife, Christine.

Smith told jurors that the catalog of evidence had no listing for a bandanna, and she recounted cutting open 15 to 20 sealed envelopes, with dwindling hope, until the bandanna slid out of one said to contain “hairs from victim.”

“Nothing would’ve happened if she hadn’t gone through there and unearthed that bandanna,” Morton said. “After she testified, I bolted out of the courtroom and caught her in the hallway. I said, ‘I had never heard that before, I owe my life to you.’”
"Right in the middle of the flipping hallway, he grabs both my hands," Smith recalled. "He's tearing up. I'm tearing up. I yelled at him and told him, 'Don't make me cry.'"

The encounter, Smith said, was the highlight of a 25-year career collecting and storing crime scene evidence.

For Morton, it was one more debt he was happy to acknowledge: "We got to hug, and I got to say thank you."

Finding balance

A lot has happened to Morton since his 2011 exoneration became a national news story. He's written a memoir, starred in a documentary, delivered too many speeches to count and lobbied for a Texas law that bears his name and aims to prevent wrongful convictions.

He also remarried — finding a soft-spoken, iron-willed sidekick named Cynthia — bought a house alongside an East Texas lake and became a father again to the son he lost while in prison.

There are grandchildren to dote on, and he still takes time to appreciate the quiet in ways only a person who endured a quarter-century of the chaos and clamor of prison can.

"Before I went inside, I always had a to-do list. I did not sit in the backyard and watch the squirrels run around in the trees and in the grass. I did not, as I do now, sometimes start the day with a big cup of coffee, out on the deck holding Cynthia's hand, watching the squirrels," Morton said.

"Whether it is the sunrise, or that good cup of coffee, or holding your wife's hand, or just taking a moment," he said, "that's probably my biggest gift from all this."

Most days when he's home, Morton is on his dock or boat, repeatedly casting a fishing lure into the lake and reeling it back, rarely with a fish attached — and that's OK. "It's called fishing, not catching," he laughs.

"There's a wonderful, therapeutic element just doing this mindless, repetitive, some would say guy thing," Morton said. "So relaxing."

It's no surprise that he and Cynthia plan a quiet celebration to mark the fifth anniversary of the day he left the Williamson County courthouse without handcuffs or chains, well on his way to formal exoneration by the state's highest criminal court for the murder of his first wife.

It's the one day when all outside commitments are refused.

"That's my Freedom Day," Morton said. "We're going to go out to a very nice restaurant and spend some alone time."

This year's celebration arrives at an opportune time, coming on the heels of Morton's second confrontation with the man convicted of killing his wife.

"Our eyes locked"

During Norwood's 2013 trial in his wife's killing, Morton wasn't allowed in the courtroom except to testify — a restriction on witnesses that was lifted for the Baker trial, even though he also testified there.

Because so much time had passed, seeing Norwood at both trials wasn't particularly difficult, Morton said, but it did prompt flashbacks to his time in prison.

"Because I had been inside so long, I've met so many guys like him," Morton said. "He's more of an opportunist — not real bright, more brawn than brains. He's not the 32- or 33-year-old guy who went in and caused so much havoc. He's a broken, old guy now."

At the first trial, Morton said, he tried to make eye contact with Norwood as he walked to and from the witness stand, but "he would never look at me."

"And this past (trial) when I testified, I tried it again, and for a brief moment our eyes locked. He's kind of a tall, lanky guy, and as soon as we did he kind of slouched down behind the monitor they had on the defense table," Morton said.

Morton figures that won't be his last interaction with Norwood, thanks to restorative justice programs that put victims and inmates together in hopes of fostering healing.

"I've always wanted to ask him why," Morton said. "But if we ever end up in a room together, it will be tough. I know in my mind that I'll get to a point where I can forgive him — but I've learned that it's much, much easier to forgive someone for something they have done to you than ... to someone else, especially if it's somebody you love."

That meeting, if Norwood agrees to it, won't be in the immediate future.

"I know, intellectually, how forgiveness works and how important it is," Morton said. "But I'm not there yet. I know it's been five years, but this isn't finished yet. There's another shoe that's going to fall. Maybe I'll get there when it seems final, when it seems to be over."

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Slow down

Once he got out of prison, Morton had almost no trouble adapting to the vast leaps in technology.

It took a lot longer to get used to the notion that large numbers of people wanted to hear him tell his story, particularly lawyer groups interested in his notions on criminal justice reform and churches drawn to his recollection of the moment he says God intervened in his life, erasing an all-consuming anger and bitterness over being imprisoned for a crime he did not commit.

Gracious with his time, Morton had a hard time saying no, at least until Cynthia sat down with a calendar and showed how they had spent more time on the road than at home in 2015.

“‘There were times we’d get home only to do laundry, repack and go out again,’” Cynthia Morton said.

“Early on, the Innocence Project people told me I had to learn to say no,” Michael Morton said. “I had no idea what they were talking about. It’s a smorgasbord of wonderfulness. How can I say no to this stuff? Now we’re trying to manage our lives better.”

A big part of that, they said, is reserving a lot of family time for their children, four grandchildren and extended family. “That’s an important thing for both of us,” Cynthia Morton said.

‘I’m just a schmo’

Morton, a grocery store manager before his time in prison, isn’t sure how long people will be interested in hearing his story, adding that he figured his time in the spotlight would have ended years ago.

“I’m just a schmo; I’m just an average guy. I’m nobody special,” he said. “Why should my words have any weight? Why should people care about what I have to tell them? I’m kind of, sort of the same guy I used to be. I’m older, sadder and wiser — but I’m not any smarter, I’m not much prettier.

“I don’t quite get it. I always remind them: This isn’t anything I did, this is something that happened to me.”

But Cynthia Morton said audiences are drawn by a significant accomplishment — his response to the injustice of losing his wife, his freedom and the chance to raise his son, Eric, who was 3 years old when his mother was killed.

“You would expect Michael to be really angry, vengeful, bitter. But he changed,” she said. “He came to a place where he was able to let all that go.”

In the meantime, Morton has begun “noodling” with one of several novels he wrote while in prison — but he clearly isn’t ready to abandon his newfound, low-key approach to life.

“It would be really cool if I can get a novel published,” he said. “Could that be the next route? I don’t know. Will I always be a part-time public speaker? I don’t know.”

He’s also fielding inquiries about making his life’s story into a movie.

“If it happens, woo-hoo, cool. If not, I’m good,” he said. “I’m out; I’m back with my boy; I’m married; we live on the water.

“Life is good.”

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Michael Morton

On the possibility of meeting and forgiving the killer

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