

A young man's suffering in the justice system finds relief

He was beaten routinely. His mental disability and young age no doubt contributed to the difficulties he experienced while imprisoned in Orleans Parish Prison, and his face reflected new marks each time members of his legal team visited him. For this young man, who just wanted to go home in time to begin the new school year, the [Orleans Public Defenders](#) (OPD) was his last hope for ending his nightmarish incarceration.

Held for almost a month on charges that were so minor they ended up transferred to municipal court, the young man could not give Lauren Anderson, the law clerk assigned to his case, his home address and he only knew his mother's first name. Lauren, a 3rd year law student at LSU, needed the information to find out if there was anyone to pay his bond. When describing him to me later, Lauren said that he was obviously terrified and his jaw had been wired shut so he could not speak clearly. She wanted to get him out as soon as possible to stop the abuse. Lauren was able to find an address for his mother but a quick check on a map placed the house in the middle of a canal in the 9th Ward. She and another law clerk, Kasey Robinson, went door to door to find his mother and, when she did, the situation did not look good. His mother was unable to post a bond for her son because she had to buy school uniforms for his younger brothers and sisters.

Lauren began looking for organizations that would pay for school uniforms so that his mother could pay his bond. After another week or so, Lauren heard back from my organization, [Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children](#) (FFLIC). For half an hour, Lauren described the young man's circumstances to us. She talked about the abuse, the unfairness of his situation, and his family's low income as the only thing standing between his current situation and safety. We knew immediately that this was the type of service our organization exists to provide and we agreed to pay his bond that day. [The Cowen Institute](#) called Lauren afterwards and not only agreed to help with school uniforms, but also graciously offered to reimburse FFLIC for his bond.

The young man was set for release. The next afternoon, Lauren went to meet him to take him home. She waited in Central Lockup for a few hours and then asked for help at the desk. She was told that something was wrong with his paperwork and that he could not be released. Lauren asked for a supervisor.

The supervisor repeated the story about his paperwork. Hours continued to pass and Lauren calmly worked her way up the chain. A bond had been paid. A release was mandatory. She repeated this fact of law to each person who told her that her client would not be released. She eventually spoke with a Major, who agreed to fix his paperwork and release him. More time passed. Finally, Lauren was notified that he had been sent to University hospital for treatment. Lauren saw her client free for the first time at 4 am that morning. She called me a few hours later to let me know that, after almost a month of abuse, the young man was home.

The Cowen Institute and my organization would not know this story without the efforts of OPD and the dedicated volunteers that work there. The young man would still be waiting under conditions of gross abuse and neglect and would have missed his first day of high school. Even after we paid his bond, he would have been held without Lauren's perseverance. That he was so young and mentally disabled only adds to the injustice that Lauren fought against. As we continue to struggle towards fairness and justice in New Orleans, we should all be thankful that it is the responsibility of OPD to protect that fairness and to protect our young people when no one else will.

Gina Womack is the Executive Director of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children. She can be reached at gwomack@fflic.org.