



Jan. 31, 2021

To the judges:

Faded from memory, with not even a roadside memorial to remind passers-by, the 2008 bus crash that killed 11 people from the Sacramento region appeared buttoned-up and resolved, the truth decided by a unanimous jury in Colusa County. Quinton Watts, the bus driver, had been sentenced to more than 26 years in prison. Locked away, his case was vivid only in the minds of his loved ones and the victims' families. But this year, Sacramento Bee reporter Jason Pohl revived the case to show how a miscarriage of justice had led to Watts' harsh prison sentence. Just as the story was set to publish, the head of California's prisons called on the county to resentence Watts. He was ordered to be released in February.

Pohl produced this remarkable story in the middle of covering the pandemic, destructive wildfires and civil unrest. He scoured thousands of pages of court documents and transcripts, law enforcement reports and forensic re-creations of the crash, and interviewed nearly everyone involved in the case. He tracked down the former prosecutor, who admitted Watts had paid his price for the accident. Pohl was in frequent contact with Watts himself, as well as his family members. He was aided by an eccentric math teacher in Sacramento who had been tracking Watts' case for years, and whose voice was finally heard.

The result was a nuanced story about a man with a troubled past who was subjected to an unfair prosecution. The Bee's investigation revealed jurors never learned that Watts had a documented seizure disorder before the crash — or that a medical professional had erroneously cleared him to drive. Watts' attorney called only one witness to defend him, and the 26-year sentence would likely be impossible by today's sentencing standards. Watts, who is Black, faced trial without any Black jurors.

The Sacramento Bee is proud of Jason Pohl's work, as well as the images by visual journalists Renée C. Byer and Sohail Al-Jamea that help tell this story. Thank you for considering this important work.

Regards,

Robert Salladay
West Region Investigative Editor, McClatchy
916-201-2959 cell