

# Tennessee Innocence Project client Artis Whitehead released from prison

By **Special to TSDMemphis.com** - 12/24/2023



*Artis Whitehead takes in freedom after 21 years in prison. His conviction was overturned after being sentenced to 249 years. He was wrongfully convicted of a robbery at B.B. King's Blues Club on Beale Street in 2002. (Courtesy photo)*

After serving two decades for a robbery that occurred at B.B. King's Blues Club on Beale Street., Artis Whitehead has been released from prison. Shelby County Criminal Court Judge Jennifer Fitzgerald issued a written order vacating his conviction after a recent hearing in September.

"Mr. Whitehead lost decades of his life after being wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit," said Jessica Van Dyke, Tennessee Innocence Project (TIP) Executive Director and Lead Counsel.

Whitehead was released on December 15th.

"TIP has been working on this case for the last four years because we believe in Mr. Whitehead's innocence. We are grateful that Mr. Whitehead trusted us to fight on his behalf."

On the morning of May 9, 2002, a robbery occurred at B.B. King's Blues Club on Beale Street. On January 24, 2003, more than eight months after the crime occurred, a Crime Stoppers tip named Whitehead as the perpetrator.

Twice, Whitehead was not selected as the perpetrator before a witness eventually picked him. Based on this, Whitehead was arrested and charged, although no physical evidence connected him to the robbery. He also did not match the description of the perpetrator.

In November 2003, a Shelby County jury convicted Whitehead of five counts of especially aggravated kidnapping, two counts of aggravated assault, two counts of especially aggravated robbery, two counts of aggravated robbery and one count of attempted robbery. The trial court sentenced Whitehead to consecutive sentences totaling 249 years. Whitehead has served almost 21 years.

“It’s actually sinking in now,” Whitehead said shortly after his release.

“Earlier today, in court, it didn’t sink in. I heard a judge make a ruling, but when I got back to the institution and they was like, ‘get your stuff. It’s time for you to go.’ It’s a surreal feeling. It’s hard to explain, especially after being incarcerated for 21 years for something that you hadn’t done.

“So just want to make up time with my grandkids and my kids and see what life holds for me.”

In a 93-page order, the judge found that Whitehead was entitled to relief on multiple legal grounds.

New evidence developed by the Tennessee Innocence Project showed that the Crime Stoppers tip was false and that the tipster lied when he inculpated Whitehead in order to get credit for the tipster’s own pending criminal charges.

TIP also developed other evidence that supported Whitehead’s innocence – including additional witnesses who viewed the robber that day and described the suspect as a different size than Whitehead.



The team that secured Artis Whitehead's release. (Courtesy photo)



Artis Whitehead (Courtesy photo)

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