



LEADERSHIP PROFILE

**Executive Director
Georgia Innocence Project
Atlanta, GA**

"A voice for the imprisoned innocent."

The Opportunity

For over 20 years, the people and partners of the Georgia Innocence Project have worked diligently on behalf of Georgia's wrongfully convicted and incarcerated.

[Georgia Innocence Project](#) (GIP) is the state's only organization focused exclusively on exonerating the unjustly convicted. Specializing in DNA-based cases, GIP has built momentum over the years, and the last few years have been most encouraging: Of the 13 individuals exonerated or freed through the work of GIP and its pro bono partners, over half were finalized within the last two years.¹

Everything GIP undertakes is in service to its overarching commitment to correct the causes and mitigate the consequences of wrongful convictions. Its founding mandate—*free the imprisoned innocent*—is its most visible work, but the organization is ambitious in its broader goals: Educate the public about the problem of wrongful convictions, advance practices to prevent others from suffering the same fate and connect the exonerated with resources to help rebuild their lives.

Respected national studies estimate that between 4% and 6% of those incarcerated in the United States are actually innocent. That means some 2000-3000 prisoners in Georgia are actually innocent of the crimes for which they were incarcerated.

GIP takes great pride in its successes, successes that have been life-changing in the most fundamental ways for the people GIP has helped

¹ Nationally, the pace of exonerations has quickened as well. The reasons are multifaceted—e.g., better science; heightened civic awareness of the potential for unjust outcomes; increasing financial support; policy and even leadership changes within various judicial and enforcement systems—but the day-in, day-out dedication of staff and pro bono lawyers cannot be discounted.



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This is truly compelling but difficult work, as the system is not set up to make [exoneration] easy.

- A GIP staff member

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GIP helps prevent future wrongful convictions by raising awareness through education and by advocating for policy and legislative reform.



free, not to mention the impact they in turn have had on their families and their communities. Even so, all involved are fully aware of the gap between GIP’s laudable successes and the promise for even greater impact ahead.

Georgia Innocence Project’s next Executive Director, just the third in GIP’s history, will have the mandate to deliver on that promise, ensuring that GIP’s third decade is characterized by the strategic, legal and operational expertise its clients deserve and the financial resources its ambitious strategy requires. As one GIP board member stated, “We are poised to explode!”

The Organization

Georgia Innocence Project has three fundamental avenues for impact:

1. Investigate wrongful conviction cases and provides direct legal services to free innocent people from incarceration
2. Provide critical reentry and recovery services to survivors of wrongful conviction
3. Expose injustices within individual cases and drive systemic reform, utilizing education and policy advocacy to prevent, correct, and remedy wrongful convictions systemwide.

GIP was founded in 2002 by Georgia State University law students Jill Polster and September Guy, who were inspired by early DNA exoneration in cases such as that of Georgia’s [Calvin C. Johnson, Jr.](#) Mr. Johnson had been convicted in 1983. In 1994, lawyers with the New York-based [Innocence Project](#) took on his case, and he was freed in 1999 after serving 16 years in Georgia state prison for a crime he did not commit.

Within a year of GIP’s founding, Mr. Johnson joined GIP’s board of directors, and in 2007 he was named chair of the board, a post he held for

several years. In addition to being the first person in Georgia to be freed after post-conviction DNA testing, he was also the first exoneree across the entire Innocence Network of 71 nonprofits to chair a member organization's board of directors.²

In the two decades since its founding, working with pro bono outside counsel, volunteers and interns, GIP has secured the freedom and exoneration of 13 innocent men. Together, these men had lost a combined 300 years to wrongful imprisonment, including the 26 years one exoneree spent on Georgia's death row. Seven of these men have been freed since 2020, thanks to momentum created by a dramatic influx of resources over the past few years.

GIP's cases reside in the very jurisdictions where they are hardest to correct. Georgia is one of only 12 states with no statutory compensation for the exonerated. As noted [here](#), GIP and its partners continue to advocate for policy changes, including reducing restrictions on motions for a new trial based on DNA evidence. The organization also works with progressive prosecutors to reduce circumstances that lead to wrongful convictions.

Among its regular vehicles for advocacy and education are local journalists (example [here](#)), [podcasts](#), a [blog](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), along with strategic partnerships advocating for reform in legislation and policies.

Georgia Innocence Project has a highly dedicated staff of 16, currently led by an Interim Executive Director who recently retired after some 25 years in nonprofit law leadership. The staff are a determined group who share a genuine passion for the work, deep respect for one another and an abiding commitment to Georgia's wrongfully incarcerated. They cherish the open, transparent

² Sadly, Calvin Johnson died on January 17, 2023, at age 65. A friend of GIP's for its entire existence, his passing evoked "deep sadness and many warm memories," as noted [here](#). His 2005 memoir, *Exit to Freedom*, is still in print.



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Basically, you could say I am living the American dream.

- the late Calvin Johnson,
Georgia's first DNA-based
exoneree and former GIP
board chair

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Can you imagine even one day incarcerated for a crime you did not commit?

- Excerpt from
GIP's training materials



work environment fostered among GIP's team over the past several years and are hopeful the new Executive Director will continue to enhance this culture.

The organization is governed by a volunteer Board of 20 Directors drawn to GIP's mission from varied roles in business, law, academia, journalism and nonprofit leadership. Just under half of GIP's current board members are lawyers, and one is an exoneree.³

GIP's budget of about \$1.5 million is surprisingly modest for an organization with its impact. The board expects the budget to grow significantly in the coming years under an Executive Director who understands and respects the importance of enhanced and sustainable support to a thriving nonprofit's ability to sustain and enhance its impact.

GIP was most gratified by the support garnered this past fall in its 20th Anniversary Celebration of Freedom, highlighted [here](#). The event was conceived and executed in short order, and its ambitious financial goals were comfortably exceeded. Notably, half the donors that evening were new to the organization, demonstrating the potential available from a more focused effort over time.

Further information on GIP can be obtained from its extensive [website](#). Other resources of note are the [Innocence Network](#), a group of 71 local and regional innocence organizations, 59 of them based in the US; the [Prison Policy Initiative](#), which, among other things, shows Georgia's incarceration rate in the context of other states and countries; and the [National Registry of Exonerations](#), a database of the over 3300 exonerations achieved since 1989.

³ Since its second year, GIP has ensured the voice of those with the lived experience of wrongful incarceration is embedded in GIP's governing body.

The Mandate

GIP seeks an experienced, visionary Executive Director who will honor the organization's heritage and committed staff while ensuring the people, systems and support are aligned to optimize the collective impact on behalf of Georgia's wrongfully convicted and incarcerated. As the head of a nonprofit accustomed to punching above its weight, GIP's next leader can expect to inherit overlapping and interconnected priorities, chief among them the following:

- With the board's guidance and input from staff and stakeholders, develop a courageous, cohesive vision for GIP's future, fully leveraging opportunities for partnership and engagement in pursuit of even greater impact.
- Ensure GIP has the resources, staff, and operational infrastructure needed to sustain and expand its impact. The cultivation and stewardship of relationships, internally and externally, will be essential to GIP's long-term success.
- Foster an atmosphere of transparency and respect between the staff and board through regular communications, clear expectations and mutual accountability for results. An organization fighting for increased transparency and accountability in the application of justice benefits from modeling similar norms for itself.
- Strengthen and grow GIP's capacity for case engagement. GIP has achieved some impressive victories in recent years, but the overall pace of Georgia's exonerations has lagged national averages, even as Georgia's incarceration rate continues to outpace that of most other states.
- Develop and execute a strategy for legislative and policy changes at the state and community levels.
- Leverage best practices and relevant technology to ensure GIP operates as efficiently and effectively as possible.



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Exonerees and those who have been freed from wrongful imprisonment are our inspiration.

The Relationships

<p>Reports to:</p>	<p>GIP Board of Directors</p>
<p>Anticipated direct reports (an evolving structure):</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy Director for Operations • Managing Attorney • Communications Manager • Development Manager • Policy Specialist
<p>Other key relationships:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community of exonerees • Leaders in the fields of public interest law and social justice • Philanthropic leaders, donors and supporters, current and potential • Appointed and elected governmental leaders • State Bar of Georgia • Former and potential GIP Board members • Peers within the Innocence Network and allied organizations • Thought leaders on issues most relevant to GIP's mission

The Candidate

The ideal candidate to lead Georgia Innocence Project will be a dynamic, legally trained professional experienced in the leadership and management of a highly entrepreneurial nonprofit committed to advancing social justice.

Experience with the incarcerated, and especially the wrongfully incarcerated, would be advantageous, but the search committee is open to candidates who demonstrate exceptional leadership skills in other relevant contexts. The most compelling contenders will demonstrate a fervor for GIP's work, an affinity for outsized challenges, and the people skills to navigate relationships with colleagues, board members and supporters who are independent thinkers, do not see failure as an option, will freely share (and passionately defend) their thoughts and opinions, and approach their work with tenacity and conviction.

A leader with a commitment to the possible informed by a clear-eyed view of hurdles ahead would be well received. Successful exonerations require the mastery of minutiae as well as strategy. The Executive Director cannot afford to get bogged down in the minutiae but absolutely must respect its role in the outcomes GIP seeks.

GIP is a small organization with a big mandate. Accordingly, it requires an executive with the passion to inspire, the experience to lead, the empathy to understand, the vision to dream—and the confidence to prevail.

Following are the primary qualities and assets being sought, not all of which any one candidate will be expected to offer:

Competency:

- A self-confident person accustomed to leading impactful mission-based organizations, ideally ones that advance social justice; an experienced, nuanced leader focused on the possible while tending to the practical
- A community champion comfortable being the face of GIP; a magnet for resources and partnerships
- Courage and capability in fundraising; demonstrated success in sustainable, diversified resource development, ideally with major donors and foundations
- A practical understanding of judiciary and legislative dynamics; someone engaged (or willing to be engaged) in the fabric of the state who will find and promote opportunities for collaboration and progress
- A board-savvy executive who understands, respects and, with a deft hand, reinforces the proper roles of governance and management; someone who can help ensure strategy and structure align with core values



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Qualities and assets being sought include the ability to make decisions in a context of limited resources and seemingly unlimited needs.



- The legal acumen to inspire confidence and establish credibility with staff and stakeholders
- Substantial management experience in a larger nonprofit or other comparable context; nonprofit board experience would be additive
- A proven steward of all the organization's assets—its people, reputation, relationships, finances, and influence
- Excellent communication skills in multiple contexts, reinforced by strong listening skills and high emotional intelligence
- The business acumen to steer an organization on the verge of rapid growth, and the commitment to the team's professional development such growth requires.

Culture:

- An inviting management style characterized by respect, openness and clarity of expectations
- An approachable, catalytic leader who can leverage strategy and inspire growth without ever losing touch with the *why* behind the work or the people who make it happen
- Ability to make decisions in a context of limited resources and seemingly unlimited needs
- A proven commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging; a high degree of cultural acuity and adaptability
- The ability in the face of competing priorities to discern when to push, when to yield and when to say no—respectfully
- Strategic and operational humility; a leader who takes genuine pride in collective success.

The Location

Georgia Innocence Program is headquartered in the historic Hurt Building in the heart of downtown Atlanta. The staff currently operates under a hybrid work policy, balancing remote work with time in the office.

With over six million residents, metro Atlanta is the country's 9th largest metropolitan area. A highly diverse community, Atlanta is home to globally respected corporations, colleges and universities, and cultural institutions.

Atlanta has a very strong legal community. Many national and global firms have a sizable local presence, with several having hundreds of lawyers based in Atlanta. Collectively they have been important supporters and allies in GIP's work.

Notably, Atlanta also has an exceptionally vibrant nonprofit community, supported by sophisticated donors, both individual and institutional. Despite the competitive funding environment—there are literally thousands of nonprofits in the region—the overall spirit within the sector is one of cooperation and collaboration, as “We can do together what I cannot do alone.”

For potential consideration or to suggest a prospect, please email

GIP@BoardWalkConsulting.com

or call **Sam Pettway** or **Michelle Hall**

at 404-BoardWalk (404-262-7392).



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The candidate will be expected to offer the business acumen to steer an organization on the verge of rapid growth.