The Trials of Marvin Mutch

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by Rachel Roberson

**Summary**

Marvin Mutch spent 41 years in prison for a crime he insists he didn’t commit. In 1975, The 19-year-old Bay Area native was convicted on circumstantial evidence of murdering a young girl in Union City, and sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole. Mutch had a rocky start behind bars, but eventually became a mentor to his fellow inmates and an advocate for prison rights. Despite his exemplary behavior, he was repeatedly denied parole, in large part because of his adamant refusal to confess to the crime he’d been convicted of.

In 2006, with legal assistance from the Northern California Innocence Project and support from high-ranking prison officials, Mutch was granted parole. But that decision was rescinded by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who did not want to be accused of allowing someone convicted of murder back on the streets. It wasn’t until 2016, at the age of 59, when Mutch finally re-entered society. His release was partly the result of an earlier court-mandated change to state parole rules making it harder to deny parole to inmates no longer considered dangerous.

Today, Mutch remains under parole supervision and continues his prison advocacy work. The Trials of Marvin Mutch, a KQED News documentary by Adam Grossberg and Alex Emslie, investigates the complex details of the original trial, and follows Mutch today as he adjusts to freedom for the first time in four decades.

**Before watching**: Brainstorm a list of five things you can think of that have changed in our society since 1975, when Mutch was convicted at the age of 19 and sent to prison. When you finish your list, discuss these items with a partner for a few minutes before beginning the video. Please answer the questions on the back of the page once the video is completed.

**Video Link**:

<https://ww2.kqed.org/lowdown/2017/05/30/lesson-plan-the-trials-of-marvin-mutch/>

**Questions**

1. Do you think someone convicted of a heinous crime can be rehabilitated and should regain freedom? Why or why not?
2. Who should be in charge of deciding if and when convicted criminals should be granted parole?
3. How can justice be better served and wrongful convictions avoided?
4. What do you think the experience has been like for him to re-enter society after so long?

**Key vocabulary**

Circumstantial (adj.) Pointing indirectly to someone’s guilt, but not conclusively proving it.

Confluence (n.) When two or more things occur at the same time.

Heinous (adj.) Very bad or evil, deserving of contempt.

Parole (n.) The release of a prisoner, on condition of good behavior, before completion of a full sentence.

Predecessor (n.) Someone who had a job or role before somebody else.

Rehabilitate (v.) To restore someone to a safe and healthy state.

Truancy (n.) The act of skipping school without permission

1. Which vocabulary term are you more aware of after watching the video, and how has it reinforced or weakened your perception of the law?