

1 of Ford Heights 4 helps former inmate

Cleared man testifies about life in prison in suit against city

By Jeff Coen
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A defendant in the infamous Ford Heights Four case took the witness stand Tuesday in federal court on behalf of Michael Evans, who is suing Chicago and a group of police officers for allegedly framing him for the murder.

Evans spent 27 years in prison before DNA evidence in 2003 cleared him of the murder of 9-year-old Lisa Cabassa. He contends police forced an eyewitness to name him and is seeking unspecified damages.

Kenneth Adams, who spent 18 years in prison for the 1978 rape and murder of a suburban couple before being cleared by DNA evidence a decade ago testified about prison life.

Adams told the jury hearing Evans' case before U.S. District Judge David Coar about the violence and dirty conditions in prison. He spent time at both the Menard and Danville Correctional Centers, where Evans also was incarcerated.

"You have to be cold. You have to be heartless at times," said Adams, whose three co-defendants in the case also were cleared. "Sometimes the situation would make you feel that way anyway. You'd feel like the world had dealt you such a tragic hand. You'd feel no emotion at all.

"On the outside, you're free to love again," he said.

Adams did tell the jury he was wrongfully convicted, but was not allowed to get into how prison might weigh more heavily on a person who is innocent.

Instead he spoke in general terms about filth, gang allegiances and fear.

Under questioning by attorney Jonathan Loevy, Adams recalled one time when he saw an inmate who had been stabbed and was bleeding.

"The thing that struck me the most about that was no one else seemed to notice," Adams said. "It seemed no one cared about this individual. I learned right away that you have to survive the best you can. No one's going to come to your aid or assistance."

Adams lost his composure once, as he talked about the end of his time behind bars. He had been sentenced to life in prison before his exoneration.

"I couldn't wait to move into a neighborhood, and be next to a park and hear kids playing," he said.

On cross-examination, lawyer Andrew Hale asked Adams whether the prisons had libraries and offered classes. Adams answered that they did.

Lawyers for the city have argued that the police officers did not coerce the eyewitness to identify Evans. They have said that the officers were reasonable in arresting Evans and were doing their jobs without having any specific information that he was innocent. DNA evidence pointed to someone else in the crime in 2003, and Evans has since been pardoned.

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