

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 163, No. 114

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## Pro bono team secures acquittal in murder case

### IP lawyer met client as court-appointed counsel in civil case

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*Law Bulletin staff writer*

A Chicago man left the Cook County Jail Thursday night after a jury found him not guilty of murder charges he'd been detained on since 2011.

While the verdict was undoubtedly a life-changer for the defendant, one of his attorneys, who works in intellectual property law, said the win is also a highlight in his career.

Omar Williams, 27, was found not guilty of murder and attempted murder following a 3½-day trial in Cook County Circuit Court before Circuit Judge Kevin M. Sheehan.

The charges date back to July 1, 2011, when 22-year-old Javone Oliphant, died as a result of multiple gunshot wounds in a parking lot of the ABLA-Robert Brooks Homes in the 1300 block of West Hastings Street on the Near West Side.

Williams and another defendant, Carnell Jones, were both charged in 2011 in connection to Oliphant's death and the shooting of another man, Andre Gladney, who lived.

It wasn't until last year that Williams met attorney Paul K. Vickrey, a partner at Vitale Vickrey Niro and Gasey LLP, a commercial litigation, intellectual property litigation and patent and trademark firm.

Last year, Vickrey and firm associate Dylan M. Brown were appointed by a federal judge to serve as counsel for Williams in a civil-rights matter in which Williams had filed a grievance over cold temperatures in his jail cell. According to Vickrey, Williams' cell was cold enough during the winter that ice accumulated on the wall.

That's when Vickrey said he got to talking with Williams about his underlying murder case.

Williams showed Vickrey a transcript of a grand jury testimony from a witness who admitted he lied to a Chicago police detective when he originally implicated Williams in the crime, which Vickrey said troubled him to the point that he and Brown offered to represent Williams on a pro bono basis beginning last August.

Vickrey's wife, Caroline Kneafsey Vickrey, who started as an attorney at Johnson & Bell Ltd. this week, joined the team in representing Williams in January.

According to information from Vickrey, the night Oliphant was killed, there were between 30 and 40 people in the parking lot.

Vickrey said there was no physical evidence linking Williams — who claimed he was not at the parking lot that night — to the shooting.

Vickrey said he thinks Williams was prosecuted in part because of his past affiliation with a gang.

One individual, Gladney, who was wounded that night, first told police he didn't see the shooter because he was texting and was hit from behind. He later implicated Williams in the crime.

In Gladney's grand jury testimony, however, he testified that a Chicago police detective coerced him into implicating Williams.

According to Vickrey, on the first day of Williams' trial Gladney again testified he didn't see who shot him because he was hit from behind. Gladney admitted that a gun linked to Williams was in fact his own, according to Vickrey, and that he was high on several substances at the time of the shooting.

Williams was also charged in the crime based on surveillance footage near the crime scene showing a person driving a wheelchair-equipped van, which Williams was known to drive during the day.

Vickrey said a witness at trial testified that another individual,



Vitale Vickrey Niro and Gasey LLP associate Dylan M. Brown (left) and partner Paul K. Vickrey (center) and Caroline Kneafsey Vickrey of Johnson & Bell Ltd. celebrate outside the Leighton Criminal Court Building on Thursday after their client, 27-year-old Omar Williams, was acquitted of first-degree murder charges filed against him in 2011. Photo provided by Paul and Caroline Vickrey

Keith Slugg, drove the van at night and identified Slugg in the video footage. Vickrey said Slugg himself was killed later in 2011.

Another key witness was from Protocol Monitoring, the company that operated the electronic ankle bracelet Slugg wore while on house arrest. According to Vickrey, that witness testified Slugg, who had a contract to drive the van, was out until 1:59 a.m. on July 2, past his 1 a.m. curfew.

Vickrey said he thinks the records from Protocol Monitoring corroborated Williams' claim that he wasn't driving the van that night. Vickrey also thinks Gladney's testimony stating that he didn't see who shot him was critical to Williams' acquittal.

Vickrey, who had never handled a murder trial, said it was a "high-anxiety case."

"In this case, if we lost, it means Omar spends his life in prison," he said.

Vickrey said Williams, who has a 6-year-old son, was "elated" to be released and reunited with his family Thursday night.

"It was a special experience all the way around. Obviously, to get an innocent man out of Cook County Jail, where he was facing a life sentence, was obviously the most compelling and most satisfying experience I've ever had in my 37 years of practice, and it was all the more special that I was able to try the case with my wife," he said.

The other defendant, Jones, who was represented by a public defender in the trial, was found guilty of first-degree murder, attempted first-degree murder and aggravated battery in the case before a separate jury.

A spokesperson with the Cook County State's Attorney's Office did not return a request for comment.

The case is *People v. Omar Williams*, 11 CR 17785.