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## '89 WHISTLE-BLOWERS FEEL VINDICATED JAILERS WHO ALLEGED ABUSE WERE FIRED *ROBIN FITZGERALD, rfitzgerald@sunherald.com*

GULFPORT --- Former Harrison County jailers fired 17 years ago after going public with allegations of abuse behind bars said they feel vindicated by a recent federal indictment.

Tony Lewis and Andrea Gibbs believe Jessie Lee Williams Jr. would be alive today if authorities had listened to them in 1989. That was the year Lewis, Gibbs and two other deputies were fired after they went public with complaints alleging the abuse of juvenile and adult detainees in the Harrison County jail system.

They also believe James Ricky "Rick" Gaston is a common link between the past and present allegations.

Gaston was warden of the adult jail at the time the four cried foul play was going on in the jail. None of the accused they named was charged following reviews by a grand jury, the state attorney general's office and the FBI.

Fast-forward to March 23 when Gaston, who most recently ran the jail booking room, and three ex-jailers were indicted in an alleged conspiracy to deprive inmates of their civil rights.

The federal indictment accuses co-defendant Ryan Teel of charges involving Williams' fatal beating in February 2006. Gaston is accused of assaulting two inmates in August and October 2005. In related guilty pleas, five ex-jailers have admitted a pattern of abuse existed at the jail for at least five years, according to court documents.

Lewis and Gibbs claim the abuse began much earlier. They maintain Gaston and other jail officials in the 1980s encouraged abuse, covered it up and taught officers how to strike inmates with an open palm above the hairline to avoid visible marks.

"The fact that a grand jury didn't find evidence of a problem speaks for itself," said Charlie Stewart, Gaston's attorney.

Gaston is the highest-ranking officer charged in the recent indictment.

The indictment is "17 years too late," said Lewis, now an ordained minister, "but the Bible says that whatever is done in the dark will be brought to the light. You've got to reap what you sow. It's just a shame that Jessie Williams had to die."

Gibbs said her first day on the job, she saw juvenile-jail warden Homer McKnight Jr. abuse a teenage female inmate. The girl "wouldn't shut up," said Gibbs, who claims McKnight stripped the girl down to her underwear, cuffed her feet, restrained her hands above her head and shoved the crotch of a dirty uniform in the girl's mouth to silence her.

Lewis said he also witnessed that incident and expressed his concerns with Joe Price, then chief deputy sheriff. Price, later elected as sheriff, did not return a phone call Thursday.

Gibbs said she and Lewis, along with deputies Will Williams and Boyce Grayson Jr., began to document abuse. She said they gathered information on about 75 incidents but weren't prepared to go public until they got an injunction to prevent officials from firing them over their claims.

"Rick Gaston got wind of it," Gibbs said.

Gibbs said Gaston took her aside at the jail and told her the four of them should report to the criminal-investigation office in a matter of hours and bring their "evidence."

Gibbs said the attorney who accompanied them requested state and federal investigators be present when the documents were turned over. Jail officials refused to make those arrangements, Gibbs said, and the four traveled to the ACLU office in Jackson for a news conference to make their accusations public.

The next day the four learned through news reports that they had been fired.

"Nobody believed us," said Gibbs. "We thought we were doing the right thing. We thought people would be glad that officers within the jail would stand up for what was right."

Interim District Attorney Joe Meadows presented the allegations to a grand jury, which declined to indict anyone the whistle-blowers accused. Meadows said the investigation involved allegations of juvenile abuse, not instances of adult abuse.

However, Grayson was indicted on an aggravated-assault charge involving a drunken adult detainee. It was later reduced to simple assault. Grayson claimed his blow was in self-defense. Grayson was convicted and served six months at the jail where he once worked.

The grand jury review became a witch-hunt against the whistle-blowers, said attorney **Wayne Woodall**.

"They became targets themselves," he said.

McKnight was never charged with a crime. In an interview with ABC's "Primetime Live" 2 1/2 years later, Forrest Bennett, grand jury foreman, said he had second thoughts about failing to indict McKnight. Bennett also said jurors didn't believe the inmates who were called to testify, in part because they had criminal records.

Gibbs and Lewis said they were stunned with the grand jury process. They said they were questioned on their loyalty to Joe Price and Sheriff Farley Rhodes, why they "hated" McKnight and for whom they planned to vote in the sheriff's election.

Lewis said the first and only time he was questioned outside the grand jury was by the FBI after the ABC interview.

"I don't hold any hard feelings toward any of them now," Lewis said. "But it's a shame the four of us had to go through what we did. It's a shame Jessie Williams had to die."

Meadows, now attorney for the Harrison County Board of Supervisors, said the 1989 grand jury could have reached a different decision.

"With additional information, sure, they might have voted differently," Meadows said. "I believe they did the best they could with the information we had."

Is he more concerned now about alleged jailhouse abuse?

"Of course," said Meadows. "I think any citizen of Harrison County should have concerns as I do, and as soon as they've completed the investigation, a court is going to make that determination."

Attorney John Whitfield, who represented the four in a claim accusing the ACLU of failing to represent them in a related lawsuit, calls the four whistle-blowers "heroes."

"They came forward to expose the abuses in the sheriff's department only to have the system, law enforcement, the district attorney's office and the courts, to turn on them," Whitfield said.

"Shame on those political officials who failed to do the right thing. Shame on a system that vilified those who did the right thing. The system protected itself by protecting the wrongdoers. The system failed people like Jessie Lee Williams and many others whose names we may never hear."