

February 12, 2022

The Honorable Richard Durbin
Chair, Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
Ranking Member, Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC

Re: Nomination of Nina Morrison to be United States District Judge

Dear Chair Durbin and Ranking Member Grassley:

My name is Anthony Wright, and I could not be more thrilled to write this letter on behalf of Nina Morrison in support of her confirmation as a Federal Judge. As a Senior Staff Attorney at the Innocence Project, Nina represented me as I fought for to be exonerated for a crime I did not commit. I spent 25 years serving a wrongful conviction before a Philadelphia jury exonerated me after a three-week retrial in August 2016. The number of things I lost while incarcerated are immeasurable—my son's entire childhood and adolescence; my mother's final years and funeral; the birth of my granddaughter; and the chance to experience young adulthood, start a career, and build on my family. Yet, despite this traumatic experience, I also gained things that continue to sustain me. My relationship with Nina tops this list.

Over the course of our attorney-client relationship, Nina represented me with empathy, power, and brilliance. My case involved the terrible rape and murder of an elderly woman in her home in North Philadelphia. It is not easy to be the voice for someone already adjudicated guilty of such a horrific crime. Still, Nina always listened to and believed me. She guided me through the complicated post-conviction world that we would navigate together for more than a decade. The vast majority of our relationship took place through phone calls and letters—I was imprisoned in Pennsylvania; Nina was working from New York City—but her warmth and compassion shone through. She believed in me and my innocence from the beginning.; she was one of very few people who did. She had my life in her hands, and I knew I could trust her completely.

Nina became my attorney when I was in the middle of a battle to get permission to conduct DNA testing in my case. On paper, there was so much evidence stacked against my innocence: a purported confession, clothing supposedly collected from my bedroom that had the victim's blood on it, and the testimony of several people who said to have seen me enter the victim's house that night. I had testified at my first trial disputing all of these things. In reality, I had been forced to sign a pre-written confession under threats and actual violence. I never wore those clothes, and they were certainly never in my bedroom, and no one could have seen me at the victim's house because I was never there. Even though a rape kit and those clothes contained biological evidence and were ready to be sent to a laboratory, Nina had to litigate my case all the way up to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to secure permission for DNA testing in my case. I remember Nina's oral argument before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court like it was yesterday. It was one of the first times in working with her that I was able to witness her in action. It was clear that she is not only a passionate and dedicated advocate, but she is also a brilliant lawyer. Today, I am proud that my case stands as the law in Pennsylvania that someone is entitled to DNA testing to prove their innocence even if their case involves a confession.

Through this litigation, I saw that Nina was highly skilled and willing to fight hard on behalf of her clients. I saw that she was unbelievably dedicated to justice in the law. But Nina went above and beyond what is required of a lawyer. Long before I was exonerated, she took the time to connect with my family members who supported me from the outside. She would call my Aunt Gladys, my father and step-mother, and my brother to give them updates, even when they were small. When my granddaughter was born six months before my retrial, Nina sent her Innocence Project onesies. Simply put, Nina became a part of my family.

Once we got permission to conduct DNA testing in my case, results started coming in at the beginning of 2012. Because of the complicated nature of my case and story, we ended up having to do the most DNA testing ever done in an Innocence Project case. Over 100 samples were tested from the rape kit and clothing, and every single one confirmed my innocence: there was another man's DNA in the rape kit and none of my DNA on those clothes. I was overwhelmed that there was finally scientific proof for what I had been saying since 1991.

One of the worst parts about being wrongfully convicted is knowing that the victim's family never got justice. Nina always understood that their pain could not be untangled from my story. The DNA results in my case not only revealed my innocence, but also identified the actual perpetrator, a man who died only three weeks after we learned his identity. While my lawyers were trying to convince the prosecutors to agree to dismiss my charges based on the DNA evidence, Nina connected with Shannon Coleman, the victim's niece. She did not want Shannon to be blindsided by press of our newly discovered evidence. Instead, it was important to us both that Shannon and her family were shown everything we had uncovered and given the opportunity to digest it in their own time and space. Shannon is an incredible woman who not only accepted that a terrible injustice had occurred to her family and me, but took it upon herself to advocate on my behalf from then on, even attending my retrial. I was always humbled by Shannon's support, and I am beyond touched that we remain friends today. I will be forever grateful that Nina's efforts towards my exoneration also brought answers and closure to her family.

Despite having overwhelming DNA evidence of innocence in my case, I was one of only a handful of exonerees in the United States who had to go through a retrial to secure my exoneration. When Nina and our team stood by me at my retrial, I sat in awe of their work. They represented me with such force that the jurors stayed behind for hours after the verdict and even came to our office the next day to meet me. When I walked out of jail a free man on August 23, 2016, hand-in-hand with family and legal team-turned family, it was the greatest moment of my life.

Serving as a judge is the highest honor in the world, maybe just behind that of a president. Shortly after I was exonerated, I went to work at the very courthouse where I had been convicted, sentenced to life in prison, and later acquitted. When the job first presented itself, my lawyers encouraged me to take it. I responded, "I just got out of prison, why would I want to go back to the courthouse that sent me there?" But I listened to their advice and had the great honor to meet and work with many judges. These men and women shaped me in the first months of my release. My only experience with judges at that point had been as a defendant in their courtrooms. But now, I got a behind-the-scenes view of them as real people who are in a position where they must make tough decisions.

I am confident that Nina will be an unbelievable judge. She has been saving lives for twenty years. She has experience representing people who are fighting the worst thing that ever happened to them, while simultaneously understanding that the crimes they are convicted of are the worst things that ever happened to the victims' families. She maintains an incredible perspective and amount of empathy that she will show towards every person who comes into her courtroom. She will never be swayed to make a decision that isn't the right decision. She has always lived the courage of her convictions and she is going to do what is right, even when it is hard.

Connecting with Nina is the best thing that happened in my life. When I first wrote to the Innocence Project for help, I never could have imagined that it would bring me under the wing of such a wonderful lawyer, advocate, and human being. It has been more than five years since I was exonerated, and I still talk about Nina to others multiple times a week. I call her when I need advice, we frequently exchange photos of our families, and we banter about our favorite sports teams. I am in tears thinking about how confirming Nina as a Federal Judge means progress for justice. The system is going in the right direction if Nina Morrison is wearing robes.

Thank you for the opportunity to write this letter.

Sincerely,

Anthony Wright