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Newsroom

New York Times Profiles RWU Law Alumna

The New York Times name-checked RWU Law in a story previewing the release of the feature film *Conviction*, which tells the true-life story of alumna Betty Anne Waters '98.

In the lead-up to the release of the feature film *Conviction*, telling the true-life story of alumna **Betty Anne Waters '98**, the *New York Times* name-checked RWU Law in a story titled, "[From Waitress to Brother's Savior, Then Hollywood Hero](#)," by Robin Progrebin.

BRISTOL, R.I., October 12, 2010 — **Betty Anne Waters [RWU Law '98]** still greets her lunch customers here as they tuck into pints of Guinness and Reuben sandwiches at Aidan's, a pub hard by the harbor in this small, boat-building town.



Ms. Waters had only a job as a waitress, her high school equivalency, two kids and a stack of bills when she set out to rescue her brother Kenneth Waters, who served 18 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. Now she has a college degree, a law degree and the stunning achievement of having succeeded, after nearly two decades, in overturning her brother's conviction.

But after he was released in 2001 — and the flurry of news attention faded — Ms. Waters, 56, returned to Aidan's, to the simple life of tending to her family and the pub where she is now general manager. No law firm. No fat salary. No fame.

"As I got to know her, I understood it," said Barry Scheck, a lawyer who assisted her on the case. "She did not become a lawyer to be a lawyer. She became a lawyer to get her brother out of jail."

Come Friday, though, when the movie "Conviction" opens in select cities, considerably more people will get to know Betty Anne Waters. The movie, starring Hilary Swank as Ms. Waters, tells her story; how she doggedly searched for DNA evidence that had supposedly been destroyed; how she enlisted Mr. Scheck and his Innocence Project to join in her quest; and how she, Mr. Scheck (played by Peter Gallagher in the film) and her friend Abra Rice (played by Minnie Driver) went house to house, getting witnesses to admit they had lied under police pressure.

Like Erin Brockovich before her, Ms. Waters is about to realize the power of the cinema to elevate someone from a name in an old news clipping to a newly minted celebrity. Already she has been to premieres in Los Angeles, Toronto and New York, with London on Friday. And already it is clear that Ms. Waters, a moon-faced woman with bangs and a strong Boston-infused accent, is not crazy about the whole Hollywood thing.

"I'm not going to say this is fun for me; I've had fun moments," she said. "I'm tired right now. I could never keep this up."

Aidan Graham, who has employed Ms. Waters at his pub as a waitress, bartender or manager for much of the past two decades, said, "She's a very private person; she doesn't like the limelight."

Sitting in a booth at Aidan's on a recent sunny afternoon with the water glistening behind her, though, Ms. Waters was positively voluble when it came to discussing "Conviction," directed by Tony Goldwyn ("They really cared about getting it right"), and her work in helping those who have been wrongfully convicted. She now volunteers for the Innocence Project, which Mr. Scheck co-directs and which works to exonerate the wrongfully accused. She speaks out against the death penalty, lobbies for legislation on criminal-justice reform and evidence preservation, and meets with prisoners who have been freed.

"It makes me happy that I can help people who've helped me," she said.

The rest of her time, Ms. Waters is content to live on a quiet street here in a house she shares with one of her sisters, the older of her two sons, his fiancée and their 7-month-old baby. She likes living just a few blocks from Aidan's, where she keeps the books in a cluttered office above the bar. The only time she has dabbled in the law since her brother's release was when the pub had trouble renewing its liquor license. She won.

"I would have caved," Mr. Graham said. "She fought for me."

Otherwise, that part of her life is over. “That’s not what I wanted to do,” she said. “It wasn’t even my idea. It was Kenny’s idea.”

Her brother pushed her toward the law. Charged with the murder and robbery of a next-door neighbor, Mr. Waters was convicted in 1983 and incarcerated after a failed appeal in 1985. He had attempted suicide and spent a month in isolation. Ms. Waters needed him to promise that he would not try to hurt himself again. He agreed, as long as she got the education that would help free him.

“I remember saying to my sister: ‘Am I going to make it through school, pass the bar? What if I don’t find the answer?’ ” she recalled. “It seemed like as long as I was doing something in school, Kenny was O.K.”

Ms. Waters’s sons say they never questioned or resented what their mother was doing. “We were very young — you think, ‘Oh, everybody goes to school to get their brother out of jail,’ ” said her son Richard Corrente Jr., 29. “I got plenty from my mother. There was never any lack of love.”

Ms. Waters began by taking night courses at the Community College of Rhode Island, **eventually attending the Roger Williams University School of Law**, all while rearing two children. (She recalls toting books to all their football games.) Her marriage ended. Her beloved boys said they wanted to live with their father, which broke her heart. The people who worked on the movie said they were inspired by Ms. Water’s perseverance, how she essentially gave up her life to save her brother’s. How many people would go to such lengths?

“I don’t think Betty Anne feels like she put herself on hold,” Ms. Swank said in a telephone interview. “I think she feels: ‘That’s my life. That’s what I was here to do, was to help and be of service to people who are innocent.’ ”

In a television interview at the Los Angeles premiere, Mr. Goldwyn said: “I’ve been working on this for nine years, which is a little less than half the time Betty Anne Waters spent fighting to get her brother out of prison. So any time I started feeling bad about the ups and downs of getting a movie made, I just thought about Betty Anne’s determination and my obligation to her to get this done.”

The film captures the childhood closeness between Ms. Waters and her brother, played by Sam Rockwell. Two of nine children and just one year apart, they were co-conspirators, cutting school to steal candy and cupcakes, then breaking into neighbors’ houses to play house.

“He always made me feel like I could be anything, do anything,” she said.

It was Ms. Waters's intense, single-minded commitment to her brother — conveyed in her insistent correspondence — that caught the attention of the Innocence Project. “The letters were pretty extraordinary,” Mr. Scheck said, “because she’s explaining that she went to college and law school to get her brother out of jail. That makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck. That’s all that she did it for.”

Six months after Mr. Waters was freed, he fell off a wall while taking a shortcut home through the dark, hit his head and died. To people close to Ms. Waters, it was the cruelest kind of fate. Test audiences couldn’t take such a tragic ending, the filmmakers said, so the movie leaves it out. But Ms. Waters speaks of the loss without self-pity or bitterness.

“Kenny had the best six months of his life,” she said. After so many years behind bars, the world was new to him, she added. He was amazed by cellphones, confounded by the many unfamiliar gadgets blinking on the car dashboard. “He couldn’t wait to go to a Home Depot,” Ms. Waters said. “He had never been to such a big store before.”

Ms. Waters’s advocacy and her interest in the criminal justice system are clear legacies of her fight for her brother. But others are surprised at how little transformed she is by her experience, how normal it seems to see her at Aidan’s these days, or at home cooking meatballs and apple pie for her large extended family.

“I just want to be a grandmother,” she said last week, after chatting with the fiddlers who play at Aidan’s during the lunch rush.

Mr. Scheck said: “It’s not everyone who gets a movie made about her life. The amazing thing is, she’s the same person. She’s this totally down-to-earth, likable, accessible person who did this extraordinary thing.”

For full story, click [here](#).

[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/13/movies/13waitress.html?scp=1&sq=roger%20williams&st=cse&_r=0]