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# Newsroom: Justice Triumphs in Conviction

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# Newsroom

## Justice Triumphs in Conviction

'Conviction,' the true-life story of alumna Betty Anne Waters '98, goes into wide release today -- Friday, Oct. 29. The Providence Journal name-dropped RWU Law in this very positive review.

[Providence Journal](#) Review: "*You'll enjoy seeing justice triumph in 'Conviction'.*" by Michael

Janusonis, Journal Arts Writer

*Sam Rockwell plays an unjustly accused murder suspect and Melissa Leo is the Massachusetts police officer who believes he did it, in "Conviction."*

**October 29, 2010:** If "Conviction" had been fiction, it would have been dismissed as too far-fetched.

But **Betty Anne Waters [RWU Law '98]** is a real person who lives in Bristol. Her 18-year quest to prove the innocence of her brother, Kenny — convicted of a murder he swore he didn't commit and sentenced to life in prison in Massachusetts — is by now part of local legend.



Waters' journey through community college, Rhode Island College, then **Roger Williams University School of Law**, all in hopes of **earning a law degree** and getting Kenny freed, makes for a powerful story of one woman's courage and determination to see justice done.

That's a lot of information to pack into a movie that runs a little less than two hours, especially when Waters must hunt down evidence believed to have been destroyed, track down witnesses whose

testimony helped send Kenny to prison, mend the fences in her dysfunctional family and try to keep Kenny believing that there is a way out from the hell of prison.

The seams show in the first hour of “Conviction” which has to cram in a lot of information and set up the story. There are flashbacks within flashbacks to show the close brother-sister ties that would bind Betty Anne and Kenny throughout their lives and make what follows believable.

And there are moments when we see Kenny (Sam Rockwell), who goes from being the life of the party in one moment to a half-cocked character who acts out in sudden violence and then back again to Mr. Nice Guy, to make one wonder whether he really was capable of murder. Even Betty Anne (Hilary Swank) sometimes can’t believe the troubles Kenny brings on himself.

Police officer Nancy Taylor (Melissa Leo) of the Ayer, Mass., Police Department certainly believes he’s capable of murdering an elderly woman in her isolated house. Kenny doesn’t do himself any favors by insulting Taylor when she first comes to question him about the 1980 murder of a neighbor. It lays the groundwork for Taylor’s later push to prosecute Kenny, whom she has fingered as the killer early on and works to put behind bars.

Testimony from witnesses who were close to him seems to doom Kenny at his 1983 trial and he is sent to prison for life.

According to the film, the only person who believes in him is Betty Anne, who undertakes nearly two decades of self-sacrifice that will cause the breakup of her marriage and the doubts of her two teenage sons. All this is told in compressed form in the nearly hour-long setup of “Conviction.” It’s presented by director Tony Goldwyn with rat-a-tat-tat speed that doesn’t allow for much introspection.

The actual outcome of Kenny Waters’ case hinged on the introduction of DNA evidence that would prove his innocence — or then again maybe prove his guilt. DNA evidence didn’t come into widespread use until well after he was imprisoned. The film has a “light-goes-on” moment when Betty Anne discovers the magic answers that DNA promises to hold in her brother’s case. It’s corny and yet it also marks the turning point in the film. From here “Conviction” gains momentum and interest.

“Conviction” hinges on a series of up-and-down moments — great euphoria, followed by decimating low points when all seems lost.

Even if one knows the outcome — and by now many people, especially hereabouts, do — the roller-coaster aspects of Pamela Gray’s script leave one breathless.

Even so, Goldwyn and Gray, saddled with too many elements for a two-hour movie, don't let the final shoe drop at the end of the film to tell us that Kenny died in a freak accident six months after his release. But then how could they? For that element also treads into the realm of the impossible.

Swank makes Betty Anne an admirable (or is it foolhardy?) woman with grit and determination who refuses to give up. Even when it seems she might fail, one admires her dogged pursuit of what she believes to be true.

Yet even with the tears and histrionics as things go against her, Swank seems less vulnerable than she should be in order to pull us into her orbit. It's not always an easy call for Rockwell's Kenny, a character whose middle name seems to be "Trouble" for his many run-ins with the law. He seems a touch of comic relief until he acts out in violent anger at a man who crossed him in a bar. But his story is compelling and he does have that vulnerability needed for the character to win one over.

Leo, despite only a few scenes, makes the sour Taylor the character you love to hate. So is then-new (and unseen on screen) Middlesex County District Attorney Martha Coakley, now Massachusetts attorney general and most recently the Democrats' candidate to fill Ted Kennedy's Senate seat, who uses Kenny's case as a political football.

Minnie Driver, brings "the other old lady" in Betty Anne's law class, **Abra Rice [RWU Law '98]**, to vibrant life as the self-appointed "best friend" who prods Betty Anne to get her law degree and helps her on the case.

Peter Gallagher is the head of Project Innocence, which uses DNA testing to overturn the convictions of innocent people.

Together they make "Conviction" more than just another episode of a TV crime-solving thriller.

**\*\*\*1/2**

### **Conviction**

*Starring: Hilary Swank, Sam Rockwell, Minnie Driver, Peter Gallagher, Melissa Leo, Juliette Lewis.*

Rated: R, contains violence, profanity, adult themes.

Running time: 1:46.

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