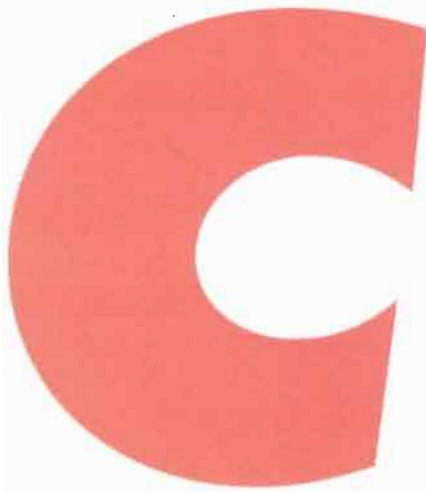


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by **MICHAEL HALL**
photographs by
MIKE MCGREGOR

Craig's List



CRAIG WATKINS HAS SPENT

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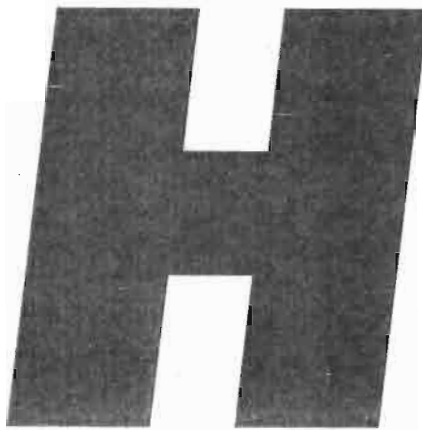
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Lawyer David Finn believes that’s exactly what happened in Dallas. Finn, who was a state prosecutor in Fort Worth from 1992 to 1995 and a judge in Dallas from 1999 to 2002, said, “Dallas County has a history of not disclosing exculpatory evidence. As a judge, I repeatedly encountered egregious Brady violations. There might be a family violence case, and the witness would be the spurned wife. She would disclose to the prosecutor, ‘I made it up; I thought he was running around on me.’ And that wouldn’t be disclosed to the defense. Not every prosecutor was like that, but the overall culture was ‘We don’t need to disclose exculpatory evidence.’” Terri Moore, Watkins’s top assistant, said, “The bottom line is, you don’t want an office policy in which promotions are tied to convictions. If an office does

that, I would think that would encourage ‘Well, I don’t want to lose this case, it’s going to hurt my pocketbook, so why don’t I just take this [exculpatory] statement—the guy is a lying piece of junk anyway—and deep-six it?’”

The most famous victim of this culture is Randall Dale Adams, probably the best-known man to walk off an American death row. He came within three days of being executed for the 1976 murder of a Dallas cop—all because police officers and prosecutors, under public pressure, chose to ignore common sense (there was no physical evidence against him) and Adams’s protestations of innocence. Instead they cleaved to the word of David Harris, a 16-year-old sociopath with a criminal record who was driving a stolen car, whose gun was the murder weapon, and who had bragged to friends days after the murder about shooting “that f—ing pig” in Dallas. Adams had no criminal record, but at 28 years old, he was eligible for the death penalty, unlike the teenage Harris. Wade’s chief assistant, Mulder, was undefeated in capital murder trials and had already sent more than twenty men to death row. Knowing Harris was an unsound witness, he somehow found three rebuttal witnesses, all of whom he introduced at trial without the courtesy of warning the defense, all of whom wrongly identified Adams as the killer. When an outraged Court of Criminal Appeals finally overturned the conviction, in 1989, it wrote, “The state was guilty of suppressing evidence favorable to the accused, deceiving the trial court ... and knowingly using perjured testimony.” Adams was released that year, Mulder went on to become one of Dallas’s most prominent defense attorneys, and Harris was executed for a different murder in 2004.

The Adams case was resolved two decades ago. Dallas County’s modern rep for winning at any cost was secured with the recent DNA exonerations. In 2001 the Texas Legislature passed a law that became Chapter 64 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, giving inmates the right to post-conviction DNA testing; more than four hundred convicts in Dallas County applied. The Dallas exonerations began that year, with David Pope, a man convicted of rape in 1986. Next came Wiley Fountain, Donald Good, Entre Karage, and a steady stream of men wrongly convicted (mostly of rape) and sent to prison, for a total of 185 years. Of the thirteen exonerated, ten were convicted in Wade’s time, two were under successor John Vance, and one was under Bill Hill, who served from 1999 to 2006.

One reason for the big numbers is simple: Long before Chapter 64 made it the law to preserve biological specimens from crime scenes, Dallas County, unlike most jurisdictions, had been doing it on its own. In other words, infamous Dallas County has wound up being one of the more progressive places in America. The county-run Southwest Institute of Forensic Sciences has huge freezers full of thousands of samples of blood, hair, saliva, and semen. “It was my understanding that we wouldn’t burn the whole sample,” Richard Zadina, a Wade ADA, said. “The reason was, if an issue ever came up or technology was improved, we could prove the person was guilty, because we thought he was guilty.”

Zadina, who now works for Watkins, is one of many former Wade prosecutors who bristle at the phrase “conviction-at-any-cost mentality.” “It’s been made to look like we had a bunch of rogue prosecutors up here, and that’s just not true,” he said. “I never saw or heard of a prosecutor who would even think about trying to prosecute an innocent person. It appears we had bad eyewitness identification. And probably less than stellar criminal defense work.” Brad Lollar, a prosecutor under Wade who now heads the Dallas public defender’s office, agreed. “We didn’t try to convict at any cost,” he said. “We didn’t want to convict innocent people. But when we had a serious offense and had one sure witness, why not prosecute? Just because the defendant said he didn’t do it?”

Indeed, the pattern in most of the exonerations is less bad-boy behavior than relentless, blinders-on prosecution based on eyewitness testimony and backed by the flimsiest of physical evidence. The methods often used in identifying the men were the same kinds used everywhere else in the country: photo arrays and live lineups, some of which were inherently suggestive, others where the police, certain they knew who the criminal was, helped victims make their choices. For example, Wiley Fountain was

the only man in his photo lineup wearing a jogging suit and baseball cap; the victim, who had been raped by a man in such a suit and cap, picked him. Police and prosecutors showed a willingness to believe eyewitnesses, even when their testimony was rather unbelievable. They trusted a twelve-year-old male rape victim who heard the voice of a man in a 7-Eleven the night after his assault and identified its owner as his attacker, even though the man, James Waller, was six feet four and weighed more than 200 pounds, while the boy had initially said his rapist was five feet eight and 150. Prosecutors had a crime that needed solving, a witness, and a suspect. Convicting an innocent man (Waller was pardoned by Governor Rick Perry in March) was easy.

Watkins lives south of Dallas, in tidy, suburban DeSoto, in a neighborhood of huge mansions with rolling front lawns and tall black iron fences. The Watkins house is the largest on his street, three stories high, with 25-foot white columns. Next door, that is to say, over the meadow and down the slope, about a quarter mile away, lives retired NFL star Tim Brown. Royce West owns the meadow, and next door to that is the home of John King, the man behind the King Group, one of the largest black-owned ad agencies in the country. DeSoto, once the home of well-to-do whites, is now the home of the black elite.

I met Watkins there early on a May morning. He looks a little like the late actor Howard Rollins, with a thin mustache and goatee with a few white hairs popping out. He padded around in his bare feet, gray slacks, and a purple Prairie View A&M University T-shirt while his wife, Tanya, got their boys breakfast. Chad, who is nine, was quiet and just getting over a sore throat. His younger brother, five-year-old Cale, was loud and silly and kept shooting me with two unloaded Nerf guns. The couple's eighteen-month-old daughter, Taryn, was still asleep. "Do you want to see some of the DA's work?" Tanya asked cheerfully and took me to a room off the den with a ladder parked in the center of a concrete floor, an electrical cord snaking through, and paint everywhere. "He took the carpet out, the ceiling tiles down, and he's going to put hardwoods down. It's going to be the exercise room." Out the window I could see one of two barbecue grills and an ornate, tiled pool.

It was a long way from Fair Park, the black neighborhood just east of downtown where Watkins is from. Driving Cale to school that morning, he told me how his grandmother Myretha Smith had been an elevator operator at the Adolphus Hotel and his grandfather Isom Clark had been a carpenter who had his own business. (There's a photograph at the African American Museum in Dallas of a streetcar scene, circa 1950, with two white women and a white child in the foreground, under a sign that says "For Whites." Behind them is a small platoon of black faces, two per seat; at their front, in a hat and checkered coat and wearing a tired expression, is Watkins's grandfather.)

Now, more than fifty years later, Watkins told me that he sees himself as part of an ongoing civil rights movement that is still fighting to change the system of crime and punishment. He sometimes places himself next to Barack Obama in this long march. "We've got a black guy who's a front-runner for president," he told me. "Who would've thought of that twenty years ago, or even four? We're in the same position—he's a first and I'm a first, the first African American DA of Dallas County. Things are really changing, and all these folks are revisiting this issue, looking at people of color as being competent. They can do these jobs. Maybe they can do them better than the folks who were there before because they have a different perspective. They're more about fairness, not just about protecting the status quo."

I asked to see his old neighborhood, and later he drove me around Fair Park in his black Mercedes G500 SUV. We went by his grandparents' house, where Watkins spent a lot of time as a child. His parents, Richard and Paula, had him when they were eighteen and seventeen, respectively, and raised him and his younger brother, Gregory, while they went to college. Paula and Richard graduated and both became teachers. Back then Fair Park was blue-collar; today it is just bleak. "Look at all this," Watkins said as we drove down lonely streets and past empty shacks. "When I was growing up, this was a thriving

neighborhood of working-class people. Everybody knew everybody, cared for one another. Then drugs came in. Drugs killed this neighborhood.”

When Watkins was a boy, he had a life-changing moment. “My cousin Reginald’s mother took the two of us to the Christ for the Nations church. At the end of the service, this guy, a white guy, asked me if I wanted to accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior. Sure. I’m seven. I don’t know what’s going on. After the ceremony he gave me a leather-clad Bible; he said it had been in his family more than a hundred years. He said that I had been called, that I’m supposed to be a preacher, that I was going to do great things. So for years I went through life thinking I’m supposed to be a preacher and not really wanting to do it.”

In 1975 his parents moved farther south, to a home in middle-class Oak Cliff. Their house had a swimming pool and a living room atrium. At first there were plenty of whites in the neighborhood, but soon it was almost all black. His mother became a reading coordinator for the Dallas Independent School District, while his father left teaching to open a KFC franchise and start his own business screen printing T-shirts.

Watkins was tall for his age and played basketball and was on the swim team at Carter High School. “I was always a good athlete,” he said, “but in high school I lost interest. I got bored with sports and started thinking philosophically.” He admired Ronald Reagan—for his personality, not his politics—and Royce West, who in 1986 ran an upstart campaign for the DA’s office. Watkins, who would soon enroll at Prairie View A&M, loved how the campaign seemed to bring South Dallas together. “I wanted to be just like him. I said, ‘I want to work in the Dallas County DA’s office.’” He took a class on the civil rights movement and realized he didn’t have to be a preacher. He chose political science as a major and eventually added a minor in criminal justice. “I figured I’d be a lawyer,” he told me, “because I could make change and still make some money.” With a new calling, he became focused on law, and after earning his degree, he got into Texas Wesleyan School of Law, in Fort Worth.

In his third year, Watkins worked as an intern at the Tarrant County district attorney’s office, then, after graduating in 1994, applied at the Dallas County DA’s office. He was turned down. He was hired as a municipal prosecutor in the city attorney’s office, working misdemeanor cases. He applied at the DA’s office again and was turned down again. He took a job at the Dallas County public defender’s office and, eager to make more money, started his own title company. He married Tanya in 1996 and soon established a law practice in a building at the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Atlanta Street in Fair Park; later he started a bail bond business. “I had the option when I started my law office: be in a North Dallas high-rise or the southern sector,” he said. “If I’d gone to North Dallas, I’d have been just another North Dallas lawyer. But I stayed in South Dallas because I knew I’d be a big fish in a small pond. The clientele may not be the same, but I’ll endear myself to the African American people. So whenever I was going to run for whatever I was going to run for, I had a base.”

In 2001 Watkins decided to run for district attorney. “I’d seen Charles Munoz run for sheriff in 2000 and get forty-seven percent of the vote without campaigning at all. I thought, ‘If I campaign and talk about issues people are concerned with that the Republicans aren’t talking about, I might win.’ I’d see first-time drug offenders go into the system and be convicted and locked up, and they’d get out and go right back to drugs again. I’d talk to elderly people. They would see people selling drugs on the corners; their houses were getting broken into every two weeks by someone stealing for drug money. And that guy from Highland Park sitting on top of the eleventh floor [of the courts building] doesn’t understand that. He’s not concerned about addressing the causes of the drug problem. He’s concerned with the conviction rate.”

Watkins, whose businesses were all thriving (“I was pretty well off,” he said), put together a grassroots

campaign of family and friends and began spending \$10,000 a month on TV ads for his law office to get his name out. His platform included drug-prevention programs for high school kids and job-placement programs for ex-cons. He won the Democratic primary and went against Bill Hill in the general election, criticizing the incumbent for the 2001 fake-drug scandal, in which innocent men—mostly poor Hispanics—had gone to prison. Hill won by only 9,986 votes. Four years later, Watkins's grassroots program was even more energized. "We had hundreds of volunteers," said his mother, who became his unofficial campaign spokesperson. His father made T-shirts and his brother, Greg, an advertising executive, helped with marketing. Watkins campaigned heavily in South Dallas and got Royce West and longtime South Dallas activist John Wiley Price on board, but he also made more trips to North Dallas, giving speeches in Highland Park. He again won the primary and went against Toby Shook, the heir apparent to the Wade-Vance-Hill machine. Watkins talked again about prevention and rehabilitation, but he also hammered Shook with the fact that some of those men exonerated by DNA had been convicted on his watch. "My opponent was trained under that system," he told voters. "You need someone who hasn't been a part of that system who's going to approach the problem with different ideals."

The Dallas Morning News, the *Dallas Observer*, and the ABC affiliate WFAA began reporting on some legal problems Watkins had been having—several liens from the IRS for unpaid taxes; lawsuits from small-business owners over money they said he owed; a threat from the DA's office if he didn't pay a \$7,675 settlement for money he owed from a contract agreement; a loan he had defaulted on from the South Dallas/Fair Park Trust Fund. Watkins got defensive, claiming the media and Shook were trying to portray him as a sleazy South Dallas businessman. "Ross Perot and Tom Hicks," he told the *Morning News* in October, "how many times have they been sued? You don't question their ability."

The Morning News endorsed Shook, who heavily outspent Watkins. But the outsider won with 50.9 percent of the vote, and at his victory celebration, Watkins proclaimed, "It's a new day in Dallas County." Indeed, it was many things: a stunning across-the-board Democratic win in Republican Dallas, including all 42 contested judgeships, plus four other county positions; a show of muscle by South Dallas black voters; and a no-confidence vote in President Bush. But it was also, Watkins told me, a repudiation of the past at the DA's office. "Toby Shook campaigned by saying, 'Henry Wade, Henry Wade, Henry Wade—I worked for the legendary Henry Wade.' He didn't see that Hispanics are scared to stop for the police and get arrested for drugs when they don't have drugs. African Americans are scared of law enforcement. They're scared of coming down to the courthouse."

Watkins is still visibly angry about the unfair way he feels he was treated. "What really gets me," he said, "was all Toby had to do was show up. He was the candidate of the status quo. The media, especially the Morning News, have always supported the mainstream candidate. They never ran a negative story on him, even though there's a lot of material, such as being there twenty-three years and never questioning the way they picked juries. They played up that I had some IRS disputes; they made it a story because they were trying to put Toby Shook on a white horse. What does having disputes with the IRS have to do with being a law-abiding citizen? I was painted as being shady because I'd been sued before, but I'm in business, and when you're in business and you have disputes, a lawsuit is filed." The suits were all settled by the end of the year, he told me, but one IRS dispute is ongoing.

"I understand I should be scrutinized, but be fair about it. I understand the rules are different for me and other blacks. That's America. You have to be ten times better than your counterparts."

Watkins's office is on the eleventh floor of the Frank Crowley Courts Building, overlooking Dealey Plaza and the downtown skyscrapers. Here he oversees the largest law office in the county, with 242 attorneys plus 128 support staff. The Dallas County DA's office has always been underfunded and overworked and has always had other elemental woes too. For example, some ADAs didn't even get computers until Bill Hill's administration. "The system has been screwed up for two years," Watkins

told me. "In Tarrant County they have new laptops. We still have those big file cabinets."

Watkins, the eternal defense attorney, leans heavily on his staff, especially his two top assistants, Terri Moore and Kevin Brooks. Moore served as a prosecutor for ten years in Tarrant County and another four with the U.S. attorney's office before becoming a defense attorney. The 48-year-old is hard-nosed in the courtroom (a "pure predator," one lawyer called her) but sunny outside of it. Where Watkins is restrained, she is fast, loud, and colorful, going off on harangues about the justice system. Brooks, the head felony prosecutor, is a former Marine and served under John Vance before going into private practice. The 46-year-old looks old-school, from his square haircut, thin mustache, and small glasses to the severe look on his face. It's safe to say that Henry Wade, by all accounts a good man but a product of his time (he once tried to shut down a club where whites and blacks partied together), would be struck dumb by the sight of the top three prosecutors in the office he built, just one generation after he left it.

At the outset Watkins fired eight ADAs, and nine more, including Shook, left on their own. Many of those who remained had worked for Shook's campaign, and they knew what Watkins had said about them. "Watkins' stump speech had promised voters that he would restore integrity to the DA's office," said a spouse of one of the fired assistants, "but to the people who worked there, some for twenty-plus years, his promise was a slap in the face." Just in case there was any doubt about Watkins's intentions, he framed copies of Article 2.01 of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, "Duties of District Attorneys," and put them up outside his office and in all 27 ADA workrooms. One sentence was in bold type: "It shall be the primary duty of all prosecuting attorneys ... not to convict but to see that justice is done."

One of Moore's reasons for leaving Fort Worth and heading east to be Watkins's number one assistant was his commitment to having an open-file policy like Tarrant County's, in which everything—police reports, witness statements, lab results—would be automatically available to the defense. "As long as I've been practicing law in Dallas County," Brooks told me, "there has been a resistance to an open-file policy. A lot of prosecutors may not always recognize what exculpatory evidence really is." In late June Moore organized a seminar on the new policy in the central jury room for all of the ADAs. "One of the things we're doing," she said, "is educating them on not violating the law. We're telling them, 'Just give the file to the defense lawyer. Don't play games.'" With the open files have come fairer plea offers from prosecutors. According to lawyer and former judge Finn, "In the old days, I'd have to fight to get discovery. Then the plea offers would be high—for example, two years in the pen for a first-time offender, like for marijuana. That would just clog the docket. Now, with an open-file policy, if it's a bad case for the defense, they tell you right up front: 'We've got you.' We get reasonable offers, and everything moves smoother."

In February Watkins caused a stir by inviting the Innocence Project of Texas (a group of state law school clinics that is independent of the New York—based Innocence Project) to examine more than four hundred Chapter 64 requests for DNA testing that prosecutors had fought and judges had turned down. (Jim Schutze, in the Dallas Observer, wrote that this decision had "probably earned Dallas the most and best public relations it's had since back-to-back Super Bowls in '78 and '79.") The idea came from Moore, but Watkins showed how badly he wanted it when in April he went before the notoriously tight commissioners' court, which supervises county budgets, to ask for a special prosecutor and staff to handle the requests. He had a few heated words with Commissioner Kenneth Mayfield but persuaded the court to grant his office \$358,876 for two prosecutors, an investigator, and a legal secretary for one year. Michelle Moore, of the public defender's office, was stunned. "In the past, we never had a DA say, 'We have a problem,' much less, 'We have to spend money to fix a problem.'"

Setting up Watkins' smart-on-crime programs is taking longer. Dallas County already had some diversion programs, most notably the drug court, which sends low-level offenders into rehab instead of

prison. In June Watkins began the Memo Agreement plan, a misdemeanor diversion program for first-time offenders (in cases not involving DWI, family violence, or public lewdness), requiring 24 to 30 hours of community service and taking classes in, say, drug education or the social consequences of stealing. Do that, plus pay court costs and stay out of trouble for sixty days, and the case will be dismissed. He has requested the funding for a prosecutor who will handle several projects, including a community court, one that, in certain rough areas, will use local residents as arbiters for nonviolent offenses like graffiti and criminal trespass. "The idea," Terri Moore told me, "is to involve the victim and community people in deciding the punishment and to communicate with the defendant. For example, if the victim is able to look the defendant in the eye and tell him that she spent her Social Security check to buy the paint to cover his graffiti, perhaps it will impact the defendant in a personal way and drive home the reality of his criminal conduct."

Prosecutors have been given more discretion by Watkins—to offer a plea, dismiss, go to trial, or send the defendant to a diversion program. Judge John Creuzot, the man behind the drug courts, said, "The bottom line is looking at the underlying reasons why people committed crimes in the first place. Try and fix those. We've had a lot more support from Watkins than from the previous DAs." He's also getting support from the 42 new Democratic judges, most of whom are former defense attorneys and 9 of whom once worked at the public defender's office. They are more prone to empathize with defendants and sympathize with Watkins's ideas.

Some of Watkins's critics say that initiating and running these programs isn't the DA's role, that his job is to prosecute criminals. Glenn White, the president of the Dallas Police Association, doesn't like the way Watkins is going easy on low-level offenders. "The key word," he told me, "is 'offender.' They're offenders. They were put in jail for a reason. Calling them minor offenders, well, they're pretty major when they break into your car." Shook took a similar view: "He talked on the campaign trail about DAs helping parolees find jobs, but I don't know if it's the prosecutor's job to find parolees jobs."

Watkins disagreed. "If you're a parolee, we're going to do an assessment of you, see what ails you, what we need to do to fix you, so when you come home, you're able to live in this society. You don't have an education or any marketable skills, but you do have a drug addiction. Well, if we don't address the problem while they are in prison, it's going to be worse when they come out. I have to enforce the law, and I also have to protect the citizens of Dallas County. I'm putting policies and programs in place to keep you from being a victim. You have to prosecute the bad guys, but there's also an element of protection, prevention, and preemption. Don't just wait for someone to commit a crime and then go prosecute. That's easy. The hard thing to do is address what's causing the problem."

With all of these liberal programs, Watkins is clearly afraid of being seen as soft on crime, and he's already asked for the death penalty in two cases. "People who commit heinous crimes are an aberration to society," he told me. He says he will continue to support it in any retrial of Thomas Miller-El, the man whose conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2005. "If we had done it right, we wouldn't be dealing with this right now."

In a little room with gray walls and carpet, on the fourth floor of the Crowley Courts Building, just behind Magistrate Ann Rust's courtroom, perhaps Watkins's grandest experiment in expanding the role of the prosecutor is taking place: admitting your mistakes. Idealistic law students from Wesleyan, working for the Innocence Project of Texas, pull out files, open folders, take notes, type on laptops, and eat microwave popcorn for lunch—all in the service of freeing the innocent. The files are from the 464 cases that Watkins promised to reopen back in February. The students pore over them looking for proof that DNA evidence even exists; then they have to decide whether the evidence would have made a difference in the case if testing had been available.

This is the process that Hill's ADAs used too, though they were notorious for fighting testing requests—approximately 90 percent of them. Much of the time, their position was understandable; the applications were frivolous (cases where DNA hadn't been left behind) or doomed (the DNA had been lost). Other times, however, the office's intransigence was just baffling, such as in the case of Wiley Fountain, the guy convicted of rape back in 1986 after being forced by police to wear a baseball cap in the lineup. No physical evidence had been used to convict him, just the victim's testimony; why not agree to a DNA test? Of course, when a judge finally ordered one in 2002, Fountain was exonerated.

Watkins changed things immediately. Symbolically, as the reformer, he was lucky. In the first couple of days of his administration, he presided over two exonerations, and a third would follow in April. "All the DNA testing had been done during the Hill administration," Nina Morrison, a staff attorney with the Innocence Project in New York, told me. "The difference is, Watkins turned those cases around quickly, and he didn't dispute their innocence. He wasn't looking for reasons to keep those people in prison."

As might be expected, the law students are in line with the spirit of the new administration. Of the first eighteen cases they had analyzed as of early August, they had already deemed thirteen appropriate for testing. The official recommendations of the students will go to an oversight committee of prosecutors. Michael Ware, the newly hired special assistant prosecutor, thinks the preliminary vetting will be done by this month. The rest of the process should be completed by Christmas.

Nobody knows exactly what they will find. The 13 exonerations came from 33 tests, but there won't be anywhere near that ratio out of the 464. Even if you discount one half to three fourths of the requests as unsound, that still leaves potentially 100 to 200 valid ones. Watkins thinks there will be more than 10 exonerations. Michelle Moore thinks it could be 25. Jeff Blackburn, a board member of the Innocence Project of Texas, says, "If we get one hundred tests and half turn out to affirm guilt and half turn out to be innocent, that's huge."

And not just in Dallas County. Those thirteen men exonerated by DNA are lucky that they were railroaded in a county that kept its blood and semen evidence. The same kinds of flawed procedures used to convict them, especially those involving mistaken eyewitnesses, have been used for years to convict thousands of other Americans of burglary, kidnapping, assault, rape, and murder, in cases where blood or semen was not kept—or was never found. We used to believe there were only a handful of the falsely convicted; the DNA exonerations have proved us wrong. Dallas County is holding up a mirror to the rest of the American criminal justice system, and the image is grim.

"I really enjoy the speaking part," Watkins told me after giving another speech, at a drug court graduation in which two dozen men and women—black, white, and brown, from their twenties to their fifties—got their diplomas and listened to the DA talk about the changes he was making. "It's really exciting when you get up there and you find your voice and people are impressed by it. You think, 'Man, I got something going on!'" Watkins's enthusiasm and naiveté are refreshing, whether in front of drug addicts struggling to come clean, real estate agents who voted for his opponent, or hard-core prosecutors accustomed to doing things the old-fashioned way. Even though he came into office with no experience as a prosecutor, he has passionately reinvented the role according to his broader ideas about justice, fairness, and openness.

Watkins told me he is in no hurry to get into the courtroom to prosecute a case. "I've got people to do that for me. We need to refocus on what a DA is. With everything we need to change, I need to work on that. I set policy. And I think I do that well." He spends his days talking to his assistants, the press, and the public. He stops by the office of his title business in Fair Park often. He keeps it for pragmatic reasons, to remind the voters of who he is and also to remind himself of the things it would be easy to forget, down in DeSoto, up on the eleventh floor.

Most reviews of his initial tenure have been positive, especially from the defense bar. "He's reenergized the office," Brad Lollar told me, "which energizes our office." Randy Schaffer, one of Randall Dale Adams's appellate attorneys, said, "If nothing else, he gets an A for changing the mentality of the place." Inside the courthouse, Brooks said that the ADAs are following Watkins's lead. "One or two individuals I've had a specific conversation with, but for the most part, all of them have gotten the message." Damita Sangermano, the head of the grand jury division, said that assistants have welcomed the diversion programs. "Most are about dealing with first-time offenders, and prosecutors see a seventeen-year-old whose life will be ruined by a felony conviction and they wish they had another option. Anytime a prosecutor is given options, that's a good thing."

Watkins has plenty of critics too, who think his inexperience will lead to his undoing, who think a DA's office is not a social welfare experiment, and who told me snarky things like "Dallas County doesn't have its first black DA, it has its first female DA" or serious things like "He needs to go on the offensive against gangs. We have a big gang problem" (Shook, now in private practice, said that). And Watkins's first eight months haven't been entirely smooth. In February the Texas Commission on Jail Standards threatened to shut down the overcrowded county jail unless it drastically reduced its population. The commissioners' court asked Watkins, Lollar, and local judges to figure out a solution; Lollar proposed plea bargains for low-level felony offenders, regardless of prior criminal record. Watkins agreed, and seven hundred offenders were released. Law-and-order types were furious, and Glenn White told me that some of the freed convicts had since committed more crimes. "It's frustrating when we put people in jail and they get let out. They're in jail because they've done something wrong, and it's important for the DA to keep them there." Still, White is sympathetic with Watkins's position. "A lot of this isn't his fault. I think he wants to put bad people in jail, but he can't because there's no space. He's in a no-win situation."

That same month the Dallas Observer reported that the DA's office cut a deal for a client of attorney Anthony Lyons, a member of Watkins's transition team. The client was a cop who had filed a false report with the DeSoto Police Department; a police captain taped a phone call in which a prosecutor said that Lyons had asked for the case to be dismissed. The implication: Watkins was stepping in to help a friend. "It's bullshit," Watkins told me. "I had no knowledge of the case. I don't know what kinds of cases Anthony Lyons has." (The DeSoto police chief later drove to Watkins's house to apologize.) Watkins turned the incident into a personal attack. "Every other DA has had friends who were defense attorneys. How many times did you get a police captain complaining about the outcome of a case because an attorney knew Bill Hill or Henry Wade? Never. But it happened to me a month in office. The rules are different." (Watkins told the New York Times that the whole affair was an attempt to "set up the DA.")

The Morning News has been relatively supportive, even running an editorial in June that read "We must admit, we're intrigued" about his "smart on crime" ideas. "Mr. Watkins has taken an aggressive approach to reviewing DNA evidence that could exonerate wrongfully convicted prisoners—a strategy that has elevated his national profile and that could help restore confidence in the criminal justice system." But the editorial went on to ask him to make public some details, benchmarks, and timelines. "That was a slap in the face," he told me. "'We want details.' Well, what kind of details did you get from John Vance and Bill Hill? Whatever I do is always going to get questioned, when you didn't question the folks who came before. And here I am trying to do the right thing."

This is the downside of Watkins's naiveté: He can't let go of past slights. Yes, his predecessors and opponents were supported by white mainstream Dallas, and he wasn't. Yes, they were taken more seriously, and he wasn't. He was an outsider.

But he is no longer. "He has to learn about navigating the political system," said Royce West. He also

has to toughen his skin. Martin Luther King did it, Obama is doing it, and Watkins is going to have to learn too. Especially if he wants to run for higher office, as almost everyone in Dallas believes he will do—or is in fact doing right now. “At this point, that’s not true,” Watkins insisted. But he admits he thinks about it. “The DA is the most powerful person in the county. What you do will directly impact the folks you represent. It’s a good training ground for higher office—if you did want to go. I think everybody’s got a calling, a reason, but few of us live up to that reason. I realize what mine is, and I was given the opportunity to do something about it. Mine is to be a lawyer, to be the DA.”

It’s a conflict he’s had before, between his calling and his ambition. The more he changes the way things are done in Dallas County—the fairer the system becomes, the more exonerations that are found, the more famous he becomes—the more likely that calling is to change again. “Look at the civil rights movement,” he told me, “people like W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, the Kennedys. All those folks who helped make this country what it’s supposed to be. They lived up to what they were put on earth for.

“That’s where I struggle. When people ask, ‘Are you going further?’ I struggle. There’s so much here to do.”

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