

(MARION COUNTY, ALA.) - When Chris Revis got the news he'd been waiting for on Feb. 13, 2015, he cried.

Revis has spent nine years on death row at Atmore's Holman Correctional Facility convicted of two counts of capital murder of Jerry Stidham.

When Judge John H. Bentley of the Marion County Circuit Court issued an order granting him a new trial for the 2005 murder, his mother and his grandmother cried, too.

Bentley ruled that Revis' 2006 trial was compromised by a pair of jurors who chitchatted about witnesses and evidence over lunch at a Hamilton Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Attorneys Clayton Tartt and Stephen Cooper, both volunteers with the Alabama Post-Conviction Relief Project (APCRP), were elated.

"I was extremely happy that Chris will finally get the fair trial that he deserves," Tartt said. "Sometimes the system does work as it was intended to work."

APCRP is a non-profit organization that matches death row inmates with volunteer counsel for post-conviction proceedings, investigate cases, locates experts and reviews files.

Tartt credited Cooper and other APCRP volunteers, as well as law students from the Equal Justice Initiative who conducted the initial investigation on Revis' case, for this victory.

Even with all the work, Revis' team could have encountered a judge unwilling to reconsider a prior judgment.

Bentley had previously sentenced Revis to death twice: after the trial, and after the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals reversed his initial sentence because he had been convicted of two counts of capital murder on the same single set of facts.

Tartt noted that Bentley demonstrated that he is "a smart, conscientious judge who was not afraid to reverse himself."

Though Bentley's decision to grant a new trial was officially predicated on the juror misconduct, the judge noted in his order that the 260-page petition for relief from judgment submitted by Revis contained ample mitigating evidence that, if presented at trial, would have led to a different outcome.

"It is this Court's unshakeable opinion that had trial counsel adequately investigated and presented even a fraction of the available mitigating evidence [t]he jury would likely have rendered a sentence of life without the possibility of parole," he wrote. "[A]nd even had they not ... the Court would have overridden the jury's death sentence."

Tartt, an associate with Birmingham's Parkman White LLP, 2010 winner of the Alabama State Bar's Pro Bono award, and former intern at the Middle District of Alabama Federal Defender Program, said he "didn't have any hesitation" to volunteer his time with APCRP.

For information on APCRP, please visit www.facebook.com/APCRP or contact Christine Freeman at 334-834-2099.