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'You should know the truth.' Was Keith LaMar a scapegoat or the leader of a 'death squad'?

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Keith LaMar led a hunger strike in January of 2011 to gain physical contact with visitors at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Youngstown, where he is incarcerated. Above, a niece and nephew, who asked to be identified only as Kayla and Kevin, visit LaMar in May. *Contributed*

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Cincinnati Enquirer

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At age 13, Keith LaMar was caught joy-riding in a stolen car in Cleveland. He admitted his guilt and served six months in juvenile detention.

A few years later, he was caught stealing jewelry. He plead guilty and served two years for the crime.

At age 19, in 1989, he was charged with murder in a drug deal gone wrong. He plead guilty then, too, and began serving a term of 18 years to life in prison.

Four years later, on Easter Sunday of 1993, LaMar was accused of orchestrating the killing of five fellow prisoners in Lucasville, Ohio, in what remains state's largest-ever prison riot.

From the very beginning, he's denied any responsibility in the uprising and the murders.

"You should know the truth," he said in "Condemned," a 2014 memoir that lays out his version of the 1993 events. "My hope is that the truth will set you free to demand that justice be done."

Over the years, he's slowly assembled advocates who believe his claim of innocence.

More recently, he's added Cincinnatians to that network, aiming to amplify his voice with a local billboard and a connection to a show at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

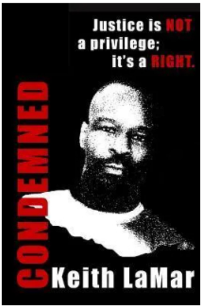
Their goal and his: to win a new trial and, ultimately, release from prison.

They are working against the clock. Ohio has scheduled his execution for Nov. 16, 2023.

Early life of crime

Keith LaMar, now 53, was born on the east side of Cleveland in 1969. His grandfather paid $12,000 for a house there, with earnings from what was then Republic Steel.

Growing up there, "you can go in any number of people's homes around dinnertime and you can sit down and eat, and it was nothing strange," LaMar said in a phone interview from the Ohio State Penitentiary in Youngstown, where he is currently incarcerated.



Keith LaMar tells his story in a self-published 2014 memoir titled "Condemned." He dictated pages to Youngstown teacher Amy Gordiejew, who also runs his website and social media accounts. *Contributed*

Life changed when he was 7 or 8 and a stepfather moved the family elsewhere in Cleveland. The stepfather was abusive, LaMar said. In the joy-riding case, the stepfather left him in detention when he could have bailed him out.

In his early teens, LaMar gravitated to crime, leaving school and living the life of a Cleveland drug dealer.

In the crime that sent him to prison – and, soon after, to the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville – LaMar shot and killed Kenyatta Collins, a one-time friend who tried to rob him while buying drugs.

"I was guilty of the crimes for which I was charged, and therefore willingly threw myself on the mercy of the court," he said in his memoir. "If I was guilty of taking the lives of five people, I would have once again thrown myself on the mercy of the court."

Instead, he plead not guilty and counted on the courts to clear his name.

"I went forward under the illusion that justice was real and that the truth, as the saying goes, would set me free," he wrote. "Was I being naïve? Yes, yes – the answer is yes."

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Then-warden Arthur Tate, left, with lawyer Niki Schwartz and FBI special agent Allen Tolen update the media about the uprising at the Southern Ohio Correctional Institution in 1993.
Enquirer File

'We takin' over!' Riot at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility

The Lucasville uprising erupted after then-Warden Arthur Tate required prisoners to be tested for tuberculosis in the spring of 1993. A group of Muslim inmates planned a protest against the test since it included a form of alcohol called phenol and Islamic law bans alcohol.

Prisoners were also on edge because of overcrowding because the state had just relocated 300 inmates from Mansfield to Lucasville. And Tate had introduced new limits on prison freedoms.

Around 12:30 p.m. that April 11, LaMar was one of about 300 inmates in the prison yard for two-plus hours of recreation time. He and a boxing buddy ran 15 miles around the track as part of their training regimen. Around 2:45 p.m., as the men lined up to return to their cells, a guard bolted out a prison door dripping with blood, followed by a masked inmate wielding a nightstick.

"We takin' over!" the inmate screamed as he continued to beat the guard.

For the next 11 days, three prison gangs ran the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility. Over that time, one guard and 10 prisoners were killed.

Mark Piepmeier, head of the criminal division of the Hamilton County prosecutor's office, believes the Lucasville prosecution team he led in 1993 convicted the right suspects. *Liz Dufour/The Enquirer*

'I chose to leave.' Keith LaMar maintains his innocence

From the beginning, LaMar has told this version of events: He quickly entered the L-6 wing of the prison, where he was housed and where the violence began, to check on his belongings. Once inside, he discovered an inmate believed to be a prison informant was being detained in his cell. A leader of the uprising gave him a choice. Stay with the leaders or leave.

“I chose to leave,” he wrote in “Condemned.”

He was back in the yard 10 minutes after he left. He remained there until 2 or 3 a.m. when the Ohio State Highway Patrol arrived and moved prisoners into a gym in a different part of the prison.

The state of Ohio has told a different version of what happened that Easter Sunday.

In court filings, attorneys maintained that LaMar and two other inmates recruited six others to form a “death squad” in the early hours of the riot. They donned masks to hide their identities. They retrieved shovels, bats and workout equipment for weapons. They hunted down and beat inmates they believed to be informants after declaring “Let’s kill all the snitches.”

“The crime scene was a mess,” said Mark Piepmeier, who served as special prosecutor and chief investigator of the Lucasville murders. “I mean, you’ve got that many inmates in a crime scene for 11 days, you can just imagine."

The next year, LaMar was indicted on charges related to five of the inmate deaths. He was convicted in all and received the death penalty for four of the five. None of his appeals since then have been successful. In 2016, the U.S. Supreme Court declined his last request for review.

"LaMar, already incarcerated as a convicted murderer, was the ringleader in a murder spree that killed five victims," the Ohio Supreme Court said in a 2002 ruling, rejecting his initial appeal.

Four other prisoners were similarly identified as leaders in the killing spree. Soon labeled the Lucasville Five, all were sentenced to death. LaMar, the youngest of the five, is the only one with an execution date. The other cases remain under appeal.

JUSTICE IS NOT A PRIVILEGE IT'S A RIGHT
#JUSTICE FOR KEITH LAMAR
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NEXT (SHIFT+N)
Condemned - Updated - Keith LaMar
35:55

Students and others at Northwestern University stage a rally in support of Keith LaMar in Chicago last November. *YouTube*

Was Keith LaMar a scapegoat for staying silent?

LaMar has long maintained he was made a scapegoat in the case. He said he refused to cooperate with authorities, despite the offer of a deal, and urged others to do the same. Inmates who agreed to cooperate won favor – prison privileges, shortened terms – for naming names, according to his and other accounts of the investigation into the uprising.

As LaMar's trial neared, his troubles grew. Early on, prosecutors balked at turning over witness statements that might have confirmed his version of what happened at Lucasville. Later, his judge accepted a list of witnesses and a summary of statements –but without names tied to who said what. That left LaMar's lawyers with little to work with in a case built mostly on eyewitnesses.

LaMar believes racial discrimination played into the ultimate verdict too. A Black man, he was tried in mostly white Lawrence County in the southeast corner of Ohio, with an all-white jury and visiting judge from another mostly white county.

“They tied my hands behind my back and put a muzzle on my mouth,” he wrote in “Condemned.”

He’s spent the last three decades trying to change that – and himself.

Learning to read and write, completing a GED, and writing a memoir

First incarcerated at 19, LaMar’s default emotion was anger. During the uprising, he punched out an inmate who would later be implicated in a murder he would be charged with. In 1997, he led a revolt, forcing three guards into a conference room with a makeshift knife. The next year, after he was moved to the state's new “supermax” prison in Youngstown, he found a new way forward.

“I came to understand that any acts of violence on my part would be used against me to prove and further substantiate the need to keep me isolated and subdued,” he wrote.

A high school dropout, he learned to read, eventually working through some 1,000 titles. He began to share some of his favorites through his Native Sons literacy project. He completed a GED and some college credits. He learned to write and turned a few pages about his Lucasville experience into his 237-page memoir.

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Keith LaMar Interview: On overcoming
KeithLamar04 *Phil Didion, Cincinnati Enquirer*

Staughton Lynd, a prominent civil rights activist and author of 2011’s “Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising,” was an early advocate.

So too was the author of a biography of Bobby Sands, the famous Irish hunger striker. A professor at Youngstown State University made LaMar a key contributor to a class. The professor’s wife, Youngstown teacher Amy Gordiejew, accelerated efforts, helping produce his memoir and building out a website, social media, an online petition and even an online store.

FREEDOM
FIRST
KEITH LAMAR
ALBERT MARQUÈS
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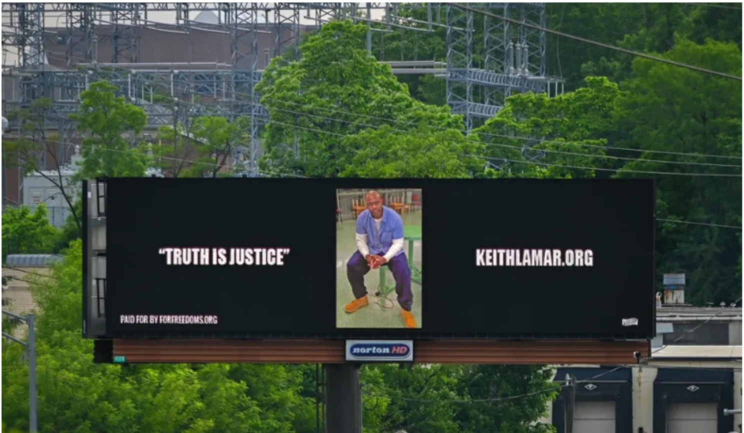
Adam O'Farrill • Gerald Appleman • Scott Colberg • Erin Corine

New York jazz musician Albert Marquès organizes concerts to support the Justice for Keith LaMar campaign. Early this year, he and co-producers released a CD, "Freedom First," that features LaMar's spoken word poetry and concert performances. *Contributed*

His newest "merch" was featured in The New York Times earlier this year -- a jazz CD called "Freedom First," with his photo on the cover and his spoken word poetry among the cuts.

Along the way, Cincinnati residents took notice.



Keith LaMar is featured on a billboard on southbound I-71 last month, as part of a national campaign called "Another Justice: By Any Medium Necessary." The campaign was organized by a nonprofit called For Freedoms, a group of artists focused on U.S. justice. *Contributed*

Cincinnati residents seek justice for Keith LaMar

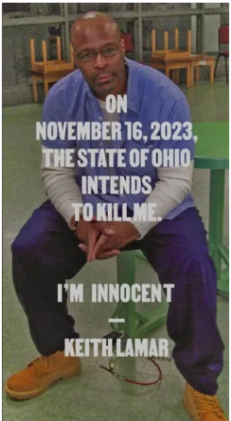
In 2015, filmmaker activists Barbara Wolf and Lorry Swain turned his memoir into a 36-minute documentary of the same name. Both are long-time opponents of the death penalty.

In 2020, Rachel McMillian connected with LaMar after he was featured in a Mother Jones magazine article about how to survive the COVID lockdown months. From there, she made him a recurring guest in online book discussions with 20 Aiken High School students in a college-prep program.

Those virtual visits, focused on books about the Black experience, inspired new Aiken grad Teri'Ana Joyner to write her college entrance essay about LaMar. He also inspired her to pick up books again. “Read. You guys have to read,” he told Joyner and classmates. “That’s what got me back to reading again.”

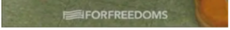
McMillian, now an assistant professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, also shared LaMar’s story with Cincinnatians she met while working on her doctorate dissertation about wrongful convictions and education. They, in turn, reached out to two other key contacts with local ties.

Art and attorneys



One was former Cincinnatian Nicole Fleetwood, an art curator and historian at New York University behind a current show at Cincinnati’s National Underground Railroad Freedom Center called “Marking Time.” The show, like Fleetwood’s book of the same name, explores the U.S. prison system through art.

Fleetwood first learned about LaMar from people who saw her “Marking Time” debut at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2020. After the show opened here, Fleetwood and LaMar collaborated on a national billboard project aimed at “imaging what a just world would look like.” Their image -- with the headline "Justice Is Truth" and the address of LaMar's website -- ran on a Norton Outdoor Advertising billboard at southbound I-71, near the Martin Luther King Drive exit, from May 23 to June 19. (An earlier, more pointed version was rejected by a different billboard company.)



Keith LaMar and Nicole Fleetwood's first billboard design, above, was rejected by a billboard provider that For Freedom representatives declined to name. Norton Outdoor Advertising accepted the version that went up on southbound I-71. *Contributed*

LaMar will talk about their collaboration and his case, with a virtual visit to a mid-July conference at the University of Cincinnati featuring Fleetwood and the "Marking Time" artists.

Art can give people in prison a purpose, said Fleetwood, a 2021 MacArthur Fellow. “If you are on death row or have a life sentence, how do you stay hopeful? How do you maintain a sense of possibility?” she said.

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Visual Voices

Cincinnati native and Miami University graduate Nicole Fleetwood, now on faculty at New York University, is featured on the cover of the latest Miami University alumni magazine. The magazine featured Fleetwood's "Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration" exhibit, which is open through Aug. 7 at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. *Contributed*

McMillian’s contacts also connected LaMar to David Singleton, a Cincinnati attorney who is executive director of Ohio Justice & Policy Center. The center does not specialize in death penalty cases. But it does mount fights for justice “for people at every stage of incarceration.”

“When the court has said no so many times, it helps to get the public involved,” Singleton said.

Singleton joined LaMar’s case late last year, working with attorney Dana Hansen Chavis on a new filing they said will highlight information unearthed since LaMar’s original trial. “We keep finding new evidence that undermines the credibility of the informants,” Singleton said.

They also want to draw attention to the heavy use of prisoner-against-prisoner testimony against him, noting that an Ohio Supreme Court 2014 task force recommended barring that practice in death penalty cases.

They are aiming to file the case in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Ohio as soon as possible, said Chavis, a Knoxville, Tennessee, defense attorney who took over LaMar’s case in 2016.

“Keith was denied a fair trial,” she said. “He deserves his day in court.”

Singleton’s aim? “Walk him out of prison in full.”

'Selective process worked'

Piepmeier was on the scene the day the riot ended in Lucasville on April 21, 1993. For the rest of that year, he returned about three times a week, traveling from Cincinnati where he remains head of the Hamilton County prosecutor’s criminal division.

Piepmeier believes the state’s prosecution team got it right. They winnowed a list of about 750 possible suspects down to less than 200. From those, they indicted 50 inmates and won convictions of 47 of them. “Our selective process, I think, worked,” he said.

Two names were repeated “over and over” in interviews with inmates, Piepmeier said. “Carlos Sanders as the leader of the riot and Keith LaMar as leader of what was termed the death squad.”

Like LaMar, Sanders was convicted and sentenced to death as one of the Lucasville Five.

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Keith LaMar Interview: On new evidence

KeithLamar02 *Phil Didion, Cincinnati Enquirer*

LaMar believes he could have proven his innocence if he'd had access to all the original interview transcripts. He and his lawyers have more of those now, as they've come out in other defendants' cases.

That might not make a difference with a new filing, Piepmeier said.

“A ton of the stuff these people are raising now are things that have been raised before courts before and they haven’t been impressed,” he said.

LaMar’s team is nonetheless likely to flood the courts with filings, typical in death penalty cases. And the filings will continue after next Nov. 16, too, if the state postpones his execution date. That has happened frequently in recent years because the state lacks the drugs to carry out lethal injections. Ohio last executed a Death Row prisoner in 2018. Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine has called the pause an "unofficial moratorium" on capital punishment.

'I don't waste a lot of time'

In his Youngstown prison cell, LaMar, reads and writes and works on his case. Friends and family visit – and thanks to a 2011 hunger strike he led, he is able to hug and hold them. He talks about books and life with students.

Since giving up violent resistance to prison life, he’s had one aim: “To live in such a way that my life would not be in vain,” he said in his memoir. “I owed that to myself ... and everybody who had taken the time to help me grow and see what my life could be.”

Unlike many other prisoners, he doesn’t own a TV. “Everything in your being is telling you to turn on and just tune all this stuff out,” he said. “But to do that in my situation will really be to forfeit my life. And I’m just not wanting to do that. I don’t waste a lot of my time.”

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Keith LaMar Interview: On his legal chances

KeithLamar01 *Phil Didion, Cincinnati Enquirer*

If the efforts of his lawyers and advocates fail, however, he wants Ohioans to keep his version of the state's famous Lucasville uprising in mind if he is executed in their name.

He would win his case in the "court of public opinion," he said, "if people open their minds enough to make room for what was left out of the narrative."

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