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Oakland County Judge Vacates Murder Conviction, Orders Immediate Release of Tashiena Combs After 27 Years in Prison

PONTIAC, Mich. – Tashiena Combs is coming home after nearly 27 years in prison. Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Nanci J. Grant granted Combs' Motion for Relief from Judgment, vacated her first-degree murder conviction, and ordered her immediate release.

Combs was sentenced to life without parole after a 2000 trial in which her attorney concealed that he was also representing her sister in a case arising from the same shooting. According to Combs' attorneys, he was also in an undisclosed sexual relationship with her sister at the time. That conflict shaped the defense Combs received. Combs' trial attorney kept two key witnesses off the stand to protect her sister's case, depriving the jury of testimony that supported Combs' claim of self-defense and called premeditation into question. Midway through trial, Combs' attorney told Combs she had to testify, though he had never prepared her to do so.

The Oakland County Prosecutor's Office agreed that Combs was entitled to relief. Prosecutors acknowledged that her trial attorney never told her he continued to represent her sister and never discussed her rights regarding the conflict of interest, as uncovered by the office's Conviction Integrity Unit. Prosecutors also acknowledged they could not proceed on a first-degree murder charge at a new trial.

In her opinion, Judge Grant found that Combs had received ineffective assistance of counsel and suffered actual prejudice. The court noted that Combs has already served more time than the sentencing guidelines would call for on either second-degree murder or voluntary manslaughter, and that she is entitled to immediate release.

"What happened in Tashiena's case is unconscionable," said Jana Mathieu, Combs' lead attorney. "Unfortunately, her case is not unique. With a legal system founded in racism, sexism, and socioeconomic oppression, it is crucial that we do not give up on people who the system has tried to throw away. It doesn't matter whether the case is recent or decades old – when a conviction is predicated on a failure of the system, there is a way to dismantle it."

Mathieu and Alona Sharon, both attorneys on the Michigan Appellate Assigned Counsel System (MAACS) roster, represented Combs. Combs' original appellate attorney, Robyn Frankel, supported their work.

The case is *People v. Combs*, Oakland County Circuit Court Case No. 1999-167507-FC.

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About MAACS

The Michigan Appellate Assigned Counsel System (MAACS) maintains the roster of private attorneys appointed to represent people who cannot afford counsel in Michigan criminal appeals and works with the State Appellate Defender Office (SADO) to ensure quality appellate representation.