

'Principled' defense lawyer happy in background

Friends say Donnie Murrell will defend an innocent man no matter the cost.

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WEST PALM BEACH — The TV cameras rolled and the Nikons fired when Kevin Coleman walked out of jail for the first time in 13 years. Family members and a media-hound minister circled around him.

Up a nearby ramp, way out of the picture, perched a man with a really bad haircut. Kevin Coleman's attorney watched his client's first moments of freedom from afar — moments that would not have happened without his volunteer efforts.

The attorney is Donnie Murrell, and that is his style: Seek no limelight, defend an innocent man no matter what the cost, and when you need a haircut after a hurricane, have your daughter get out her horse clippers and do it.

"Down to earth" is how most friends describe the 48-year-old criminal defense lawyer. "Principled," "folksy," "straight-shooter" and "smart" are other descriptions.

"I was in the courtroom with Perry Mason. He was so good," said Coleman's mother, Rose.

The Coleman case landed in Murrell's lap in 2000 through a chain of people, all volunteers. Attorney Carey Haughwout had worked on it for years but couldn't continue after being elected public defender. Hilary Sheehan, a private investigator, chased leads for 11 years, working dangerous neighborhoods and pleading with terrified witnesses to talk. Investigators Chuck Thomason and Kerry Sheehan, Hilary's sister, did the same. All pressed Murrell to take the case.

Murrell's no softie, though. And he's not one to do to lots of pro bono work for the Legal Aid Society.

"I'd rather write a check," he said.

But Coleman, he believed, was absolutely innocent, the first such client he'd had in a very long time.

Murrell has defended some of the county's most vilified accused murderers, sparing some from the death penalty, exonerating others.

He has defended people passionately, his friends say. The U.S. marshal who once had to separate Murrell and a federal prosecutor in a standoff might say too passionately.

"Donnie believes in standing on principles, regardless of the consequences," said a former law partner, Peter Birch. "He's not afraid to ruffle some feathers and step on some toes."

A federal judge once filed a complaint with the Florida Bar after Murrell, then president of a statewide defense lawyers association, wrote an article blasting another federal judge. Murrell also was held in contempt by a state judge for refusing to retract a word he used that



Murrell: Won
Kevin Coleman
a new trial.

the judge considered offensive.

Grinning, Murrell tells of the furious judge and another lawyer in the room whispering, "Take it back, take it back."

"It was like we were in second grade. I said no."

Murrell appealed the contempt citation, saying the word he had used — "prostituted" — had been used by judges in appellate case law and he was just referring to that. He won the appeal.

Murrell lives in Jupiter with his wife of 25 years and two daughters. A philosophy major as an undergraduate, Murrell attended law school at Florida State University. His favorite philosopher? "Me."

Murrell began to love the law after he started as an assistant public defender in criminal cases.

"We get paid to mess with the government. What a blast," he said.

Murrell said he never kept track of how many hours he spent drafting Coleman's appeals and preparing to present new evidence. But it probably numbers in the hundreds. His

fee for paying clients is \$300 an hour.

Murrell won Coleman a new trial, and with it a chance of being acquitted of first-degree murder based on new evidence. Coleman had a good chance of winning.

The case ended last month with Coleman pleading no contest second-degree murder. He had been in prison for 13 years, recently had become sick and couldn't stand to wait in custody any longer for a new trial. He walked out of jail convicted murderer, but he walked out.

The end was a "hollow" victory, Murrell said.

"I don't blame him a bit. I do have to do the time. He does. I get to go fishing," he said.

Murrell cried that day at the jail standing at his faraway perch, seeing Kevin Coleman go free. The victory did not seem so "hollow" right then.

"I'm going to dry my eyes and get back to some paying clients," he said before driving away.

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