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Actor Christian Bale, photographed by Nigel Parry

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PICTURE STORY

Free at Last

TWENTY YEARS AGO, DWAYNE DAIL REFUSED A SLAP-ON-THE-WRIST PLEA bargain on a rape charge, only to be convicted by a jury and sentenced to life in prison. Last summer, DNA testing on some long-lost evidence from the case finally proved Dail's innocence. On August 28, he was suddenly a free man.

Charlotte News & Observer reporter Mandy Locke, photographer Shawn Rocco and videographer Travis Long covered Dail's release hearing. Captivated by his story and his eloquence, Locke and Rocco traveled to Dail's new home in Florida this past November to document the transition of a man for whom time had stopped in 1987. Their story, called "Dail: Life Unbarred" appeared on December 9 in captivating print and multimedia versions.

The project blossomed from the efforts of the journalists to get beyond the clichés, particularly Dail's euphoria at the hearing and his departure from court. "We were thinking of getting that other layer: What's he going to do [after his release]?" Rocco explains.

By chance, Dail and his family got on the same elevator as Rocco when they were leaving the courthouse. No other journalists were present, so Rocco

introduced himself. He and Locke accompanied the family to their cars—something no other journalists did, to Rocco's surprise—and Dail ended up agreeing to an interview with Locke after lunch.

The paper ran a news story the next day. Later on, says Rocco, "We were thinking of telling a larger story" about wrongful convictions, because the topic was timely. DNA exonerations are increasingly common, and the wrongful rape prosecution of several Duke lacrosse players was still on the minds of News & Observer readers.

"Mandy thought that in order to get to the bigger story, there has to be an entry point—something you can reach out and touch. Not an overarching story about the system, but one person's story," Rocco says.

Dail seemed like the perfect subject.

"He could talk, and people would listen. He was such a wonderful speaker—the emotion in his face, and the music in his voice, it's very compelling," says Rocco.

Locke got approval from her editors to visit Dail in Florida for a week. Rocco, meanwhile, was given

Above: Dwayne Dail, recently exonerated in a child rape case, stretches during a break while on his way to a hearing. His former girlfriend has filed a lawsuit seeking back child support.

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three days to join Locke so he could document Dail's post-prison life. He also took a video camera to tape interviews with him.

The challenge for Rocco was finding compelling images quickly of someone in limbo.

"He's not working yet, he's not in school. He's just hanging out with his family, going to the beach. What events can I cover besides him sitting on his back porch smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee?" Rocco says.

It turns out Dail was living in a shed behind his brother's house, which was shared by his extended family. "I didn't know until I got there how they danced around each other," Rocco says. "I knew I

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would get some family stuff."

Rocco focused in particular on Dail's efforts to build a relationship with his 18-year-old son. He was looking for "the quiet moments—sitting on the couch, or going to beach, or throwing a football around. Those might not be visually active, but they are storytelling moments, I had to keep eye out for stuff like that, for a touch, a glance, an eyebrow raised, a mood."

Rocco was shooting video at the same time, and struggling with it. Part of the problem was the bulk of the gear, which made him more conspicuous than he wanted to be. The other problem was juggling the media.

"You're constantly thinking, 'When do I take stills? When do I take video?' It drives you crazy. It's hard to do both. It takes two different frames of mind."

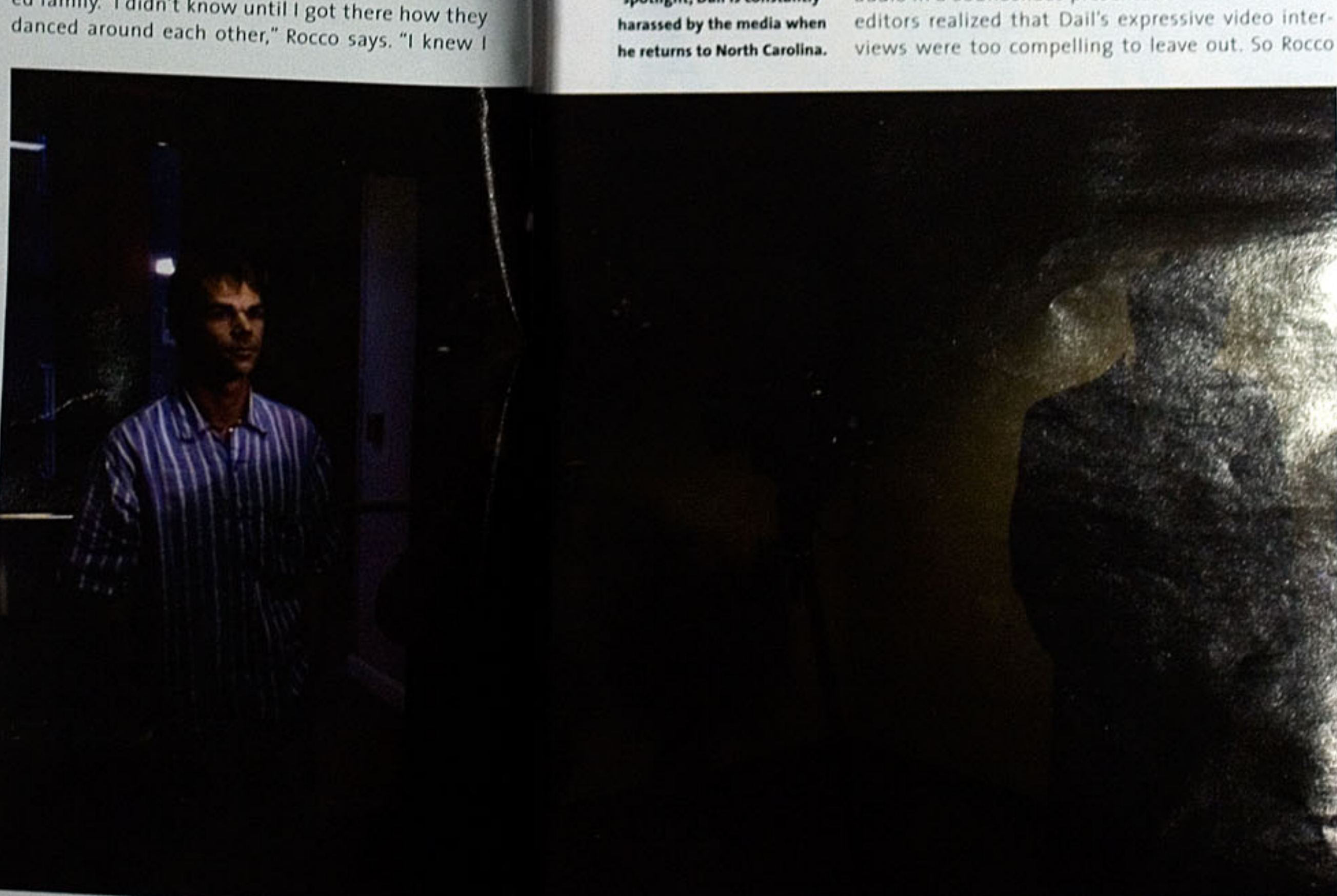
Dail sat down for several video interviews, in which he communicates a palpable sense of loss and rage mixed with gratitude for the sister who stuck by him, the friends he left behind in jail and the lawyers who helped free him.

Rocco credits the power of those interviews to Locke's deft technique.

"She would ask questions and then be quiet," Rocco recalls. "She has ways of getting people to open up. It was a cathartic experience for [Dail]. On some things he said, 'I'd rather not [talk about it],' then a few minutes later he would go right into it."

Rocco's original plan was to combine stills and audio in a Soundslides presentation. But he and his editors realized that Dail's expressive video interviews were too compelling to leave out. So Rocco

Opposite page, top: Dianna Davis couldn't be happier that her brother Dwayne was finally released from prison after serving 18 years for a crime he didn't commit. This page, below: Now in the local spotlight, Dail is constantly harassed by the media when he returns to North Carolina.



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"WHEN YOU REALIZE HOW MANY MINUTES YOU HAVE TO FILL," ROCCO EXPLAINS, "YOU HAVE TO THINK ABOUT HOW YOU'RE GOING TO FILM THAT TIME, WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE STORY, THE SUBJECT OR YOUR JOB [BY SETTING UP SHOTS]."

had to figure out how to make a movie instead using Final Cut Pro, which he hadn't used before.

Travis Long guided Rocco through that process, and helped edit the video. Like most multimedia stories, theirs is built around the audio. After listening to the audio, a three-chapter story structure emerged: imprisonment, exoneration and Dail's life now. "It had a clear beginning, middle and end," says Long.

Long and Rocco struggled to edit the audio and find enough good B-roll (cutaway) footage to show with the sound bites, so viewers wouldn't get bored just watching Dail talking into the camera.

Long recalls, "Shawn would listen and say, 'This is great!' and I would be like, 'What on earth are you going to [show] with a 30 second sound bite?'"

Rocco explains, "When you realize how many minutes you have to fill, you have to think about how you're going to film that time, without compromising the story, the subject or your job [by setting up shots]. It's totally B-roll,

B-roll, B-roll. That's all I hear from Travis," Rocco says. "If you don't have stuff to keep it moving, it's going to be stagnant."

They finally went through the audio clip by clip, with Long writing the sound bites on Post-it notes. They then arranged them by chapter, and worked them into a logical timeline. "We camped out in that studio every waking hour for almost a week," Long says. "There was a lot of blood on the floor. We killed a lot of great ideas."

Still photos helped carry the audio in the third chapter. Long's news footage provided some of the B-roll for the second chapter, about the exoneration. Realizing he needed more B-roll for the first chapter, Rocco got permission to shoot video at the prison where Dail had lived. He spent nearly five hours, framing scenes around the prison yard as he would frame landscapes with a medium-format camera, he explains. He also gathered ambient sound.

Scott Sharpe assisted with the photo editing, and Rob Roberts "was the third eye" on the video editing, says Long. Roberts also did the technical production at the end, including converting the movie to Flash Format for Web display.

"Dail: Life Unbarred" is available online at <http://www.newsobserver.com/1181/story/819065.html>

—by David Walker