

*The National Registry*  
of  
**EXONERATIONS**

## SANDRA CRAIG

### Other Maryland Exonerations



Sandra Craig

In 1981, Sandra Craig opened Craig's Country Pre-School, a day care facility for children that featured a swimming pool, hot tub, playhouse and playground in Clarksville, Maryland.

In April 1985, Craig reported to state social workers that a 5-year-old girl had told a staff member that Craig's 15-year-old son, Jamal, had molested her. The complaint resulted in a negotiated agreement with Howard County prosecutors in which child abuse charges would be dropped after a year if he received counseling and remained away from the center while children were present.

In June 1986, parents of two children at the center alleged that their children had been physically and sexually abused. One of the children alleged that she and Craig were photographed together in the nude by Craig's son.

Soon, two more children made similar claims and following an investigation by state officials, the center was closed on July 25, 1986 and a criminal investigation was commenced.

The investigation widened—the police report detailing the allegations grew to more than 200 pages—and stories of ritualized abuse began to appear in the news media. Ultimately, the case became, like the McMartin Preschool case, a massive case of child abuse hysteria.

On September 10, 1986, Craig, 39, was indicted on 53 counts of child pornography as well as sexual and physical abuse of nine children between March 1984 and July 1986. Jamal, 16, was indicted on eight counts, including rape, involving a six-year-old girl.

In December 1986, a Howard County Circuit Court judge ruled that the 13 indictments against Craig would be tried separately.

Craig was convicted in the first trial on April 1, 1987, of sexual abuse of one six-year-old girl, who testified over closed circuit television. The girl was questioned in the judge's chambers with only the judge, prosecutor and defense attorney present because the prosecution claimed that it would be unduly traumatic for her to testify in the presence of her abuser.

The girl testified that Craig kicked her repeatedly, hit her "private places" with a stick and threatened to kill her if she told anyone. The girl said Craig pushed thumbtacks into her skin and killed a rabbit in her presence by smashing its skull with a hammer.

In addition, a boy testified that Craig had stuck a screwdriver into his anus. Another child said Craig dug a hole near the playground and buried her in a cage.

An expert on child abuse testified for the prosecution that his examination of the children showed that the abuse had caused internal scarring indicating they had been molested in a "remarkably consistent manner."

A defense expert said his examination of the six-year-old did not produce the same evidence, but conceded he could not rule out that she had been abused.

Craig's attorney argued that the children had never complained until they were taken to a child therapist and he contended that adults had "programmed" the children to make the allegations.

Craig testified on her own behalf and denied she had ever harmed or molested any children.

Jamal Craig went on trial in July 1987, but the trial was halted almost as soon as it began when the key prosecution witness, a seven-year-old child, was unable to remember anything about the pre-school or Jamal. The judge ruled the girl incompetent to testify and the case was dismissed.

In September 1987, Craig was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Craig appealed, presenting evidence that the prosecution concealed large amounts of exculpatory evidence. Among other things, the six-year-old girl had given a broad array of inconsistent statements, including identifying numerous other people as her abusers, and that the prosecutor in the case – who attended some of the interviews – knew of these statements.

Defense attorneys asserted that this evidence, discovered after the trial, showed the children had blamed many others, including Ms. Craig's daughter Mika and her son Jamal, for the vaginal and anal injuries they attributed to Ms. Craig at trial. The evidence also showed that the girl had previously mistaken someone else for Ms. Craig. Further, the evidence showed that the girl's therapist believed that she did not know

**State:** Maryland

**County:** Howard

**Most Serious Crime:** Child Sex Abuse

**Additional Convictions:** Assault

**Reported Crime Date:** 1985

**Convicted:** 1987

**Exonerated:** 1991

**Sentence:** 10 years

**Race:** Black

**Sex:** Female

**Age at the date of crime:** 37

**Contributing Factors:** Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct

**Did DNA evidence contribute to the exoneration?:** No

truth from fantasy and that the vaginal scarring that was observed on her could have been caused by other children or other adults, and could also have been self-inflicted.

In July 1989, the Maryland Court of Appeals ruled unanimously that Craig's 6th Amendment right to confront her accusers was violated because the child witnesses were allowed to testify via closed-circuit television without adequate justification.

In June 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court, remanded the case back to the Maryland Court of Appeals with an order to reconsider its ruling and apply a more lenient constitutional standard for permitting testimony by children from a remote location.

In May 1991, the Maryland Court of Appeals reaffirmed its earlier decision, ruling that the trial judge had not satisfied the new standard announced by the Supreme Court when he allowed the children to testify by close-circuit television.

On July 2, 1991, Howard County prosecutors dismissed all the charges. Craig was never tried on the remaining 12 indictments.

– *Maurice Possley*

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**Report an error or add more information about this case.**

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## ABOUT THE REGISTRY

The National Registry of Exonerations is a project of the Newkirk Center for Science & Society at University of California Irvine, the University of Michigan Law School and Michigan State University College of Law. It was founded in 2012 in conjunction with the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law. The Registry provides detailed information about every known exoneration in the United States since 1989—cases in which a person was wrongly convicted of a crime and later cleared of all the charges based on new evidence of innocence. The Registry also maintains a more limited database of known exonerations prior to 1989.

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