Marty Tankleff’s story is one of the most well-known wrongful conviction stories. At the age of 17, Marty woke up to a horrific scene: his parents had been attacked—his mother was dead and his father was near death. While his family went to the hospital with his father, Marty was taken to the police headquarters, almost an hour away, for questioning. Hours later, after many lies by the interrogating detectives, they produced a dubious, unsigned confession which would serve as the primary evidence against him in court; the “confession” was neither videotaped nor audiotaped, though Suffolk County had procedures and equipment in place to record interrogations. Despite significant evidence pointing to other suspects, Marty was tried and convicted for the murder of his parents. In 2007, after 17 ½ years in prison, Marty’s conviction was vacated by the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court, arguing that new testimony taken after Tankleff’s original trial appeared to connect another man to the killings (For more on Marty’s case, read here).

The lesser known part of this story involves his childhood friend, Georgetown Professor of Government and Law, Marc Morjé Howard. Marc and Marty had been classmates since the age of 3. When Marty was arrested, Marc, then an aspiring journalist, knew something was “off” with the case and wrote about it for the school newspaper, The Purple Parrot. Over the years, Marc would talk about Marty’s case to anyone who would listen and eventually applied to law school to help exonerate Marty. Although Marty was exonerated before Marc began law school, Marc still went to law school, and continued down the path of correcting wrongful convictions and supporting criminal justice and prison reform. Marty became a regular guest speaker in Marc’s well known “Prisons and Punishment” class at Georgetown (for more on Marc & Marty’s friendship, listen to this NPR interview).

In Spring 2018, Marty became an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown, and he and Marc co-taught a class that is generating a lot of public attention. Over the course of a semester, the two guided a group of 16 undergraduate students through the re-investigation of four cases of wrongful conviction: John Moss, Tim Wright, Valentino Dixon, and Kenneth Bond—who have collectively served 96 years in prison for crimes they did not commit. The class and the students’ quest for justice, are the subject of a forthcoming Strong Island Films six-episode documentary series.

I spoke with Marc and Marty via telephone to discuss their experience teaching the course and how others might try to implement something similar. The interview has been edited for length and clarity:

SA: Tell me a little about how this course came together.

Marc: I’ve been teaching different things and experimenting with trying to offer non-traditional classes that get people really involved, classes that take people into prisons and just deal with real life issues. I host a lot of guest speakers—just bringing real life into the idyllic college setting. When Marty got his J.D. and passed the New York bar exam, he was looking for new challenges. We started talking about “what if we taught a course together?” Marty would come
down and guest lecture in my classes every year
and the students all loved him – he was the
highlight of the class. Then we said, ‘What if we
took it to the next level? What if we taught a class
together?’ We wanted to do something different
that could take advantage of our connection, of
Marty’s experience having been wrongfully
convicted and then exonerated, as well as my
experience being a part of his team, and we
wanted to see if we could have our students play
a role in doing that for other wrongfully convicted
people.

Marty: Every time I came down to speak with
Marc’s students there was always a connection
with students who said ‘What more can I do?’ and
it was, in part, these students who inspired us to
come up with this plan. Students would take one
of Marc’s classes and ask ‘Can I volunteer for the
Innocence Project? How do I get involved in a
wrongful convictions case?’ and Marc and I
started talking about how these students are so
motivated and want to do something, and we
thought, ‘Why don’t we bring that something to
them?’

SA: Many people originally assumed you were
using law students, but these were
undergraduate students. Tell me a little bit about
the background of the students in the class.

Marc: One big thing to emphasize is that they’re
not doing legal work, so this is very different
from law school Innocence Project type clinics.
In some ways, it’s almost more powerful because
you only have a single semester and there’s only
so much you can do.

Marty: When thinking about this class, Marc
and I spoke with another friend from High
School, Cindy DePasquale of Strong Island
Films, and we developed the idea of filming every
aspect of the class. In anticipation of this,
students had to submit a 3-minute video about
why they wanted to be in the class, what in their
background gave them some unique perspective,
and why they would be a great student.

As far as the background of the students, one of
the students in the class grew up in South Africa
and one of the lines in her application video was
‘I didn’t hear about princes and fairies, I heard
about injustice and Nelson Mandela.’ Another
student saw her mother get stabbed in the back
when she was 5. Another student’s father was a
public defender in Maryland who had recently
died of cancer, and she wanted to honor his
memory and continue his legacy. The
backgrounds of the students were so interesting
and really made the class even more unique.

SA: Tell me a little bit about the structure of the
class. Did you teach them about false
confessions, eyewitnesses, etc. beforehand, or
did they learn this information on the go?

Marc: A lot of them had taken a class with me
previously, so about two-thirds of them were very
primed and up to speed, and the others were fairly
informed given their backgrounds and interests.

Marty: I think probably 70-80% were planning
on going to law school, some of them had already
applied to law school. One student had even
interned at the Innocence Project in New York
City.

SA: How did you pick the cases? What
resources did the students have?

Marc: Marc and I picked a group of eight likely
wrongful conviction cases, and we sent case
summaries to the students in advance, with the
goal of having them select the most interesting
five. On the first day of class, we discussed all the
cases and let the students make their choices and
form their groups. As they dove into the cases,
we served as consultants on what kind of experts
they would need, and as the students developed
insight into their cases we reached out to a
number of specialized experts. We probably had
close to 40-50 guest speakers and experts in every
field you could imagine, from crime scene
reconstruction to ballistics experts to Barry
Scheck (of the Innocence Project). We said to the
students, ‘if you think you need something, speak
to us.’

Marty: Marty is too modest to say this, but all of
these experts respond when Marty calls. He’s a
celebrity within the wrongful conviction field, so
a request from Marty is certainly very different
than a request from me or an undergraduate
student.

Marty: Our success was really because of the
students in the class who were really committed
to their projects and especially to the men in
prison. Their interest and their passion, the time
that they committed – I don’t even know what
word to say – they were just so dedicated. Now, even though the semester is over, just about every student in the class wants to stay involved in the cases.

SA: Marc, you’ve obviously been teaching about criminal justice reform for years. From a student learning perspective how was this semester different?

Marc: It was totally different because they were not just learning about a topic and studying it—they were actually contributing to correcting an injustice. It was not an exercise, it was not just learning, these were actual cases. It was a big responsibility, too.

Marty: The chair of the Government Department said that this class has inspired not only just the students, but also the institution and the community. One person said our film screening was the most moving, powerful event she had been to in her 25 years at Georgetown.

SA: I imagine that as professors hear about this they’re going to wonder how they can do something similar themselves. Obviously, it is a significant undertaking, so what would you advise for anyone who is thinking about doing something similar?

Marty: There’s only one Marc and Marty, so in a weird way it’s hard to replicate. Our connection is part of what makes the class so interesting and trying to replicate that anywhere would be difficult. This is a difficult task to undertake. It was probably a year of discussions, months of planning. Two different institutions have reached out to us to present on our course to inspire students to get involved in these cases or inspire professors or team of professors to develop a similar course. Also, the students did an amazing job. One of our cases dealt with a man who has been imprisoned for 38 years. The cases had thousands of pages of records to review, analyze, and summarize. I think, if an institution wanted to start a similar program they should have Marc and myself, and even the students involved in this class, come and explain what it takes to do a class like this.

Marc: I don’t want discourage people who want to do work along these lines. I think there’s a lot that one can do now with media, film, documentaries. I would encourage professors to get their students doing work that is more practical, work that involves real people, real lives, real struggles, real suffering – working to move the needle towards justice in some way. It’s important to realize that we are living in a world where there is tremendous injustice, and we have the ability to do something about it, and I think we have an obligation to try.

Marty: From my point of view, every institution in America should have a program like this (The Georgetown University Prisons and Justice Initiative). Especially institutions that have a journalism program or film program and a criminal justice department that, if they could work together, they might find it more manageable to put a course like this together.

Marc: Video was such an essential element of this class. Students had a film crew on them at all times in class, during crime scene reinvestigations and interviews, and on the prison visits.

Marty: Also, each student group was given a camera and training on how to use their phones to film interviews. They were documenting every aspect of this class. For example, in the Kenneth Bond case, thanks to a private investigator’s help, the students were able to track down the original eyewitness who said ‘23 years ago I wasn’t 100% sure I identified the right person, and I’m still not 100% sure I identified the right person.’ Barry Scheck’s first question was, ‘did you get a sworn statement?’ and Marc said ‘even better, we have a videotaped statement.’

SA: What are the next steps?

Marc: Now we’re talking to law firms to represent these guys.

Marty: The students have already done the background research. Any law firm could look at these documentaries, look at the what the students found and put together, and find a way to file post-conviction motions.

You can view the students’ films [here](#).
Dr. Sara Appleby is an Assistant Professor of Psychology focusing on Psychology and Law at Mercer University in Macon, GA. She teaches Inside-Out prison-based courses and conducts research on deception detection, police interrogations, confessions and legal decision-making. She interviewed Marc and Marty in May 2018.

Marc Morjé Howard, J.D., Ph.D., is a Professor of Government and Law at Georgetown University and Director of Georgetown’s Prisons and Justice Initiative. Howard’s most recent book is *Unusually Cruel: Prisons, Punishment, and the Real American Exceptionalism*.

Marty Tankleff, J.D., is an Adjunct Professor of Government at Georgetown University and will be an Adjunct Professor at Touro Law School in Fall 2018. Tankleff spent 17 ½ years in prison for crimes he did not commit.