

Billy Sothern, Crusading New Orleans Defense Lawyer, Dies at 45

He was known for taking on some of Louisiana's toughest cases, including the wrongful conviction of Albert Woodfox, who spent 42 years in solitary confinement.



By Clay Risen

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Billy Sothern, a defense lawyer renowned for taking on some of Louisiana's toughest capital cases — including the wrongful conviction of Albert Woodfox, who spent 42 years in solitary confinement for a crime he didn't commit — died on Sept. 30 at his home in Great Barrington, Mass., where he and his family had moved during the pandemic. He was 45.

His wife, Nikki Page Sothern, said he had been fighting Covid, thyroid cancer and major depressive disorder, and that he died by suicide.

With his cherubic grin, energetic idealism and impressive legal chops, Mr. Sothern could have been a character out of a John Grisham novel. He arrived in New Orleans from New York City in 2001, right out of law school and intent on fighting on behalf of impoverished clients across what he and others called the Death Belt: the stretch of the Deep South from lower Alabama to East Texas where numerous capital punishment cases unfold.

His work for Mr. Woodfox, who wrote a critically acclaimed memoir and died in August, was merely Mr. Sothern's best-known case.



Mr. Sothern, left, was with his client Albert Woodfox, third from left, when he was released from prison in 2016 after spending 42 years in solitary confinement for a crime he didn't commit. Also there were Mr. Woodfox's brother Michael, second from left, and George Kendall, another lawyer. Bryan Tarnowski for The New York Times

His first significant victory came not long after he joined an organization called the Louisiana Capital Assistance Center as a staff lawyer. It involved Ryan Matthews, who had been sentenced to death for the 1997 murder of a New Orleans grocer, Tommy Vanhooe, although no DNA evidence was found on a ski mask used in the crime.

While working on another case, Mr. Sothern heard secondhand about an inmate bragging that he was the one who had killed Mr. Vanhooe. He checked the inmate's DNA against samples from the mask. They matched.

He then led the effort to get Mr. Matthews's conviction overturned, working alongside Clive Stafford Smith, the founder of Reprieve, which defends victims of wrongful imprisonment. Mr. Matthews was released in 2004.

Mr. Sothern did more than defend people in court; he stayed in touch afterward, often forming close friendships. Before he defended people, he got to know them intimately — their families, their lives, their communities — and in the process often became a part of those communities himself.

He became a part of the New Orleans community, too. He and his wife purchased what he described as a “big old falling-over place” in the city, with plans to spend the next few decades renovating it, bit by bit. They hosted regular parties, where Mr. Sothern, a world-class raconteur in a city overflowing with them, might hold forth on anything from poetry to jazz to cocktails, his charisma built on curiosity and never on braggadocio.



Mr. Sothern's first significant legal victory involved Ryan Matthews, who had been sentenced to death for a 1997 murder, and whose conviction was eventually overturned. Mr. Sothern is seen here with Mr. Matthews and another defense lawyer, Shauneen Lambe, at the Jefferson Parish jail. Emily Kunstler

Similar qualities informed his writing about his adoptive city, which appeared in publications like Salon, The New York Times and The Believer. He wrote a memoir, “Down in New Orleans: Reflections From a Drowned City” (2007), about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and contributed an essay to “Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas” (2013), by Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker.

“Everything he wrote, even if it was about something petty like football, was beautiful, like it was out of this time,” Rachel Maddow of MSNBC, a close friend, said in a phone interview. “I know people who moved to New Orleans because of what Billy wrote.”

William Martin Sothern Jr. was born on Feb. 15, 1977, in Norwalk, Conn. He grew up in various towns on Long Island and attended Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. His father led a varied career that included designing children’s clothing and running a mold-remediation company. His mother, Winifred (Williams) Woodward, was a homemaker.

Along with his wife, Mr. Sothern is survived by his parents, who later divorced; his daughters, Rose Mae and Pearl Alma Sothern; his stepfather, Newell Kingsley Woodward; two brothers, Eric Sothern and Jason Warner; and two sisters, Lauren Sothern and Wendy McManus.

He attended St. John’s College in Annapolis, Md., where he met Ms. Page Sothern and pursued, as all St. John’s students do, a double major in philosophy and the history of mathematics and science. He graduated in 1998 and immediately entered law school at New York University.

His studies at St. John’s left him fascinated with morality and social justice, as did his friendship with the progressive lawyer William Kunstler, whose daughter he dated in high school.



Mr. Sothern, a New York transplant who wrote frequently about his adopted city, with Rachel Maddow of MSNBC in 2010. "I know people," Ms. Maddow said, "who moved to New Orleans because of what Billy wrote." Brian Lawdermilk/NBC

Just as significant, if not more, was a teenage run-in with the law that led to his being arrested on drug charges. But instead of going to prison, he was sent to rehab. Convinced that had he been anything other than white and middle class, the outcome — and therefore his life — would have been decidedly different, he dedicated his career to finding out why.

He soon found a mentor in Bryan Stevenson, a professor at N.Y.U. and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. Mr. Sothern spent a summer working at the organization's headquarters in Montgomery, Ala., and another summer working for a capital-defense nonprofit in New Orleans. By his third year he had plans in place to return to Louisiana after graduation.

"I always told my students that to do the most important, the most effective work, the most urgent work, you've got to be willing to go where the problems are," Mr. Stevenson said in a phone interview. "And he really embraced that view."

Mr. Sothern joined the Louisiana Capital Assistance Center, and in 2004 he went to work for an offshoot, the Capital Appeals Project, as deputy director. He later went into private practice, taking on state-assigned indigent clients at the trial and appellate level.

Like Mr. Stevenson, he believed that no one was as bad as his worst act. That principle led him to take on not just wrongful-conviction cases, but also cases where the guilt was undeniable but he felt the punishment was unduly harsh.

Mr. Sothern was a member of the legal team that in 2008 persuaded the Supreme Court to overturn the death-penalty conviction of a child rapist, Patrick Kennedy. In another case, after a judge sentenced Shon Miller to death for killing four people, Mr. Sothern got that reduced to life imprisonment, arguing that Mr. Miller had been psychotic at the time of the crime.

Mr. Sothern was fond of poetry. He recited lines in conversation and sprinkled them through his writing. In a 2007 guest essay for *The Times* about the murder of a close friend, he quoted "Dirge Without Music," a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground

So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). You can find a list of additional resources at SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources.