

Lawyer's award in Toyota case: A free man

By Editorial Board

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Congratulations to local lawyer Bob Hilliard for the honor he will receive today from the Innocence Project of Minnesota. Hilliard worked successfully, at no charge, to free a man who had been convicted of criminal vehicular homicide. Hilliard presented evidence that the man's 1996 Toyota Camry might have been prone to sudden unintended acceleration.

The defendant, Koua Fong Lee, had maintained all along that he tried to brake but couldn't. In 2007, when he was convicted and sent to prison, his car's reputation for reliability was stellar and the outrage over three deaths was more likely to be directed at Lee than his car. Hilliard learned of Lee's situation while working on civil cases related to the later disclosures that Toyotas were prone to sudden acceleration. He contacted Lee's attorney and offered to help.

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A judge in August granted Lee a new trial and the prosecution declined to appeal the ruling or seek to retry Lee.

Hilliard served charity and justice by intervening. His actions reflect positively on his profession and its capacity for defending and protecting the innocent. He and Minnesota-based lawyer Brent Schafer will received the newly created and aptly named Never Forgotten award for their work in Lee's case.