

# 'Reawakened to the American dream': Yusef Salaam on his path to New York City council



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There's a lilt in Yusef Salaam's voice.

It's the sound of a man who has spent time behind bars for a crime he didn't commit. But there's more to it than that.

Salaam was once criminally prosecuted and publicly persecuted for a horrendous crime, the brutal attack on a jogger in New York City's Central Park. Even though he did not do the crime. Even though he was just a boy at the time.

The sound in Salaam's voice is the sound of a man whose city once failed him. But it's something more.

On Wednesday, after a week spent tallying the city's ranked-choice votes, the New York City Board of Elections declared an official victor in the City Council's Democratic primary. In Harlem's Ninth District, with its heavily Democratic base, a primary win is a nearly certain path to the seat.

The winner, with 64% of the vote: Yusef Salaam.

"It's official," Salaam told me Wednesday evening.

The sound in his voice was not vengeance, though that would stand to reason. His victory could be considered poetic justice – a high point for a man who suffered many low ones

behind prison bars for nearly seven years.

Salaam, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray and Korey Wise were all boys in 1989, when they were convicted of raping a woman who had been found brutally beaten after going for a late-evening jog through Central Park. The boys were commonly referred to as the Central Park Five.

Salaam was just 14.

But there was little justice in their case. They had been coerced into confessing. Their names were cleared in 2002. Convicted murderer Matias Reyes confessed to the park assault. Reyes' admission was confirmed by DNA evidence.

The boys – now men – would eventually become known as the Exonerated Five.

“I was awakened to the American nightmare after wanting the American dream,” Salaam told me Wednesday. “And now I get the opportunity to be reawakened to the American dream and be a person who can lead our people.”

**Interview:** Will Trump get presumption of innocence five boys in Central Park jogger case did not?

## **A brief history of two men**

I first interviewed Salaam in March, after former President Donald Trump was indicted by a Manhattan grand jury. When news of the criminal indictment broke, Salaam released a one-word statement on Twitter: "Karma."

See, these men have a history. I don't want to dwell on it, and I told Salaam as much. But it's part of his story.

In 1989, as the boys faced charges in the attack, an outraged city thirsted for their punishment. That wasn't solely because of the horrific crime. It was fueled by the rhetoric of a New York real estate developer.

Trump spent \$85,000 for ads across the city's newspapers that screamed: "BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY AND BRING BACK OUR POLICE!"

Trump claimed that the city was being "ruled by the law of the streets, as roving bands of wild criminals roam our neighborhoods, dispensing their own vicious brand of twisted hatred on whomever they encounter."

"They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes. They must serve as examples for their crimes," he wrote. "They must serve as examples so that others will think long and hard before committing a crime or an act of violence."

Time, of course, proved Salaam innocent, and proved those full-page ads wrong. But not before he had been forced to suffer.

Even once Salaam was exonerated, that kind of rhetoric didn't go away, not in 2002 or in 2016 or even in 2023.

During his presidency, Trump refused to apologize for his actions.

But on Wednesday, the big story wasn't about an ex-president.

## **Righting the wrongs of the past**

I asked Salaam on Wednesday whether he believed that New York voters were, at least in part, trying to right the wrong of his unjust conviction and the accompanying vitriol.

For Salaam, Trump represents the idea that his life was disposable, that his existence was negotiable. "Imagine if we would have been killed," Salaam says to me, giving me just enough time to do so.

And then he continues with what he calls "the beauty" of his campaign. The sound in his voice is not recrimination – much as that would be understandable. It's something closer to happiness.

“As I talked to people, whether it was a phone call or meeting people on the streets at train stops, it became very apparent that there was still some lingering sorrow that people may have felt,” Salaam told me. “There were people who would be on the phone, and they would just burst out crying, apologizing, thanking me ... because I'm not angry, I'm not bitter and that I'm really trying to do something about the conditions of our people.”

Those conditions include his goals of increasing affordable housing, pushing public safety reform and growing mental health access. After all, it's not about politics for Salaam. He's quick to acknowledge that he's a novice. But he says he's one firmly focused on offering a fresh perspective to government.

Salaam knows he could have just disappeared after being exonerated. He could have chosen to live a quiet life. But even in prison, he dreamed of the day when he would be free to leave a mark for others. It's his new mantra, one he learned from young students when he was campaigning: "We lift as we climb."

"Leadership is service," he tells me.

"I can look back and see that everything that I went through was for this very moment and everything that's going to happen next," Salaam says.

I can hear it, the sound of a man whose city failed him, who had powerful people call for his death, who spent years wrongly imprisoned. It's the unmistakable sound of redemption.

"It's one thing for people to know who you are and where you came from," he says. "But it is a completely different thing when people are cheering and counting on you to be a light into the future."

Sometimes the universe gets it right. Sometimes voters do. Karma doesn't seem to miss.

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