As a student at University of Michigan Law School, David A. Moran used to walk over to the courthouse just to see what was going on. And what was going on was criminal cases.

He was hooked. He’s found his calling — righting the wrongs of the criminal defense system.

After working as a clerk for Hon. Ralph B. Guy Jr. in the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, he went to work for the State Appellate Defender Office (SADO) in Detroit. And his very first case sticks in his mind as an example of everything that’s wrong with the way criminal cases are prosecuted.

His client, David Tucker, was accused and convicted of assault with intent to do great bodily harm for beating a manager of a McDonald’s restaurant where Tucker worked.

Tucker had a 35-minute bench trial and a lawyer who did no investigation, Moran said. So he investigated and found that the manager’s testimony was inconsistent, as he claimed he’d been in a coma for months, when it actually was days. The manager had named another person as his attacker; but at the preliminary exam claimed he didn’t know the other man, and pointed to Tucker, claiming that Tucker had beaten him.

The judge wouldn’t hear of the inconsistencies in the case. He wouldn’t look at the evidence and physically turned away when witnesses were testifying.

It wasn’t until Moran got to the 6th Circuit that he was able to get Tucker acquitted.

“It’s an extreme example,” Moran said. “But these horror stories are not hard to find.”

Moran worked for SADO for eight years before going to Wayne State University Law School, where he taught criminal law.

In 2008, he left Wayne State to open the Michigan Innocence Clinic, which litigates claims of innocence by prisoners in cases where no DNA evidence is available. Since the clinic opened in January 2009, the 10 cases it has taken resulted in two acquittals and two retrials.

Moran also teaches Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure classes, and, unlike most clinic instructors, he prefers the big, first-year law classes.

He’s possibly best known for his work on Halbert v. Michigan, in which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Michigan’s laws that denied appellate counsel to assist indigent defendants who had pleaded guilty, as unconstitutional.

The clinic’s newest client is Keith Robinson, convicted in the 1986 shooting death of Ajena Sims, and shooting Sims’ husband, Durrell.

But as in the Tucker case, little investigation was done by Robinson’s lawyer, so the jury never knew that Ajena Sims could not have been murdered at the time her husband claimed she was. The jury never knew that a key witness, a then-14-year-old neighborhood boy, had been taken to a fancy restaurant by police officers who told him how helpful it would be if he had seen Robinson heading toward the Sims home with a gun. The jury believed that Robinson had jumped from the bushes and shot Durrell Sims after killing Ajena.

But Moran knows the rest of the story, backed up by findings from a forensic pathologist, and corroborated by the very witnesses who testified against Robinson more than 15 years ago.

The clinic filed a motion for relief from judgment last year. The motion is pending in Wayne County Circuit Court.

Moran could have chosen less stressful work. He could have chosen a career in which he’d chalk more cases up in the win column than in the loss column. And he might have found work that doesn’t wake him up at night, leaving him to wonder whether there was more he could have done.

But the work he’s doing now, he said, is what he wants to do.

“The combination of teaching and litigating is extremely satisfying,” Moran said. “Even though it’s stressful and frustrating, the wins are very sweet.”

— CAROL LUNDBERG