

[A CT mother murdered, a son wrongly accused and a 50-year legacy](#)

[Saul Kassin](#) September 24, 2023 at 9:13 a.m.



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Playwright Arthur Miller talks with Peter Reilly at a reception in Falls Village on Dec. 5, 1976, to celebrate Reilly's being freed of a manslaughter charge in the 1973 death of his mother, Barbara Gibbons.

On Sept. 28, 1973, 50 years ago this week, [Barbara Gibbons](#) of Canaan was sexually assaulted and stabbed to death. Ms. Gibbons, 51 years old, lived in a small one-bedroom house with her 18-year-old son, [Peter Reilly](#). Looking back, Peter describes his mother as “100 percent parent, all about me.”

When Peter came home from a church youth center that night, he called out, “Hey mom, I’m home.” But she didn’t answer. Then he found her lying naked on the bedroom floor, on her back, eyes closed, in a pool of blood. Her throat had been slashed.

Mercifully, it is hard for most of us to fathom Peter’s mental and emotional state at that horrific moment that he was orphaned. He went into the kitchen and called for an ambulance. Then he called a doctor and the local hospital, which contacted state police. Within minutes, emergency personnel arrived only to find Peter in a corner. His mother was pronounced dead.

What happened next demonstrated the kind of egregiously misguided law enforcement work that risks the entrapment and [wrongful conviction of innocent people](#). Make no mistake: When police and prosecutors close a case on an innocent person, the villainous perpetrator remains free on the street, poised and likely to reoffend, and the victim's family and friends are denied a sense of closure. To this day, Reilly is frustrated that his mother's killer was never sought and brought to justice.

Immediately upon arrival, and without any serious investigation, police determined that Reilly was suspicious. Reilly, a high school senior who had started to play guitar in a rock band, was a good kid. No witnesses or physical evidence implicated him. His body and clothing were clean. He loved his mother, had no history of violence, and had never been in trouble before.

Yet at 2 a.m. he was hauled into the State Police Barracks and deemed a suspect because of what a sergeant described as his cool and unemotional demeanor. Spoiler alert: Over the years, research has completely discredited conventional police wisdom that lying reveals itself in a person's face, body, posture, emotionality and other aspects of demeanor. There is no right way to react to trauma.

Forming a suspicion on a baseless hunch, police read Reilly his Miranda rights to silence and to counsel, which he reflexively waived because, as most innocent but wrongfully convicted defendants later explain, he had nothing to hide. Growing up in a small town, he trusted local law enforcement. "I hadn't done anything wrong and this is America," he would later say on the [CBS television show "60 Minutes."](#)

Through the night and into the day, the traumatized son of Barbara Gibbons was interrogated — alone, without family present or a lawyer. During the course of eight hours of questions, accusations and denials, in the alternating presence of four officers, Reilly agreed to take a polygraph "lie detector test" in a session that was tape recorded. As scripted, he was then told that he failed the test, a test that was infallible. "Pete, we go strictly by the charts," he was advised. "And the charts say you hurt your mother last night."

False polygraph feedback was, and still is, a common but dangerous ploy in the interrogation business. For Peter, the experience was disorienting, as he underwent a chilling mental transition and came to question his own innocence. "This test is giving me doubts right now," he said. Told that he must have blocked the event from consciousness, which is why he cannot remember it, Reilly later inferred that "Well, it really looks like I did it." Later still, he confabulated a memory and confessed to slashing his mother's throat with a straight razor he used for model airplanes.

Based on this confession, which he recanted shortly thereafter, Reilly was arrested, prosecuted and convicted at trial.

Everyone in town who knew Reilly at the time knew instinctively that the story made no sense, that he was not capable of such violence. [Connecticut-based playwright Arthur Miller](#) — the same Arthur Miller who wrote “The Crucible” and “Death of a Salesman” — mobilized a rescue effort. Others in town also rallied in his support.

After Reilly had spent over a year in prison, a new prosecutor combing through the case file discovered independent evidence that he could not have committed the murder and that the confession even he came to believe was false. Reilly was released and [the charges ultimately were dismissed](#). As the dust was settling, two still-riveting books about this case were published: Joan Barthel’s (1976) “Death in Canaan” and [Donald Connery’s \(1977\) “Guilty Until Proven Innocent.”](#)

For me, there is an intensely personal component to the story. Peter and I are about the same age. Yet while I just was starting out in the social psychology PhD program at UConn in Storrs, his life was upended and derailed in Litchfield County. Just a few years later, I read the Barthel and Connery books about the case while breaking open the scientific study of false confessions. For me, Reilly became the poster child for a type of false confession that was unheard of at the time. In 1985, my colleague Larry Wrightsman and I coined the term “internalized false confession” to describe this most unimaginable phenomenon by which an innocent person not only succumbs to the pressure to confess but shockingly comes to believe in his own culpability.

Don Connery closed his book by asking: “How many more Peter Reillys are there?” It is not possible to come up with a precise number or even a good estimate. But this phenomenon has since been observed all over the world. [The Innocence Project](#), founded in 1992, reports that an astonishing 29 percent of its postconviction DNA exonerations in the U.S. involved false confessions in evidence. Some number of these were of the internalized type. My sure answer to “how many more are there” is too many.

Peter and I first met in 2006 when I invited him to visit my psychology-and-law class at Williams College in Western Massachusetts. Thirty-plus years had passed. He and Don Connery came up together. His appearance was mesmerizing — and a source of inspiration.

We have since stayed in touch, occasionally talking by phone. Peter lives in Tolland, just a few miles from the University of Connecticut. Together, he and I have fondly recalled the historic

appearance of the Beatles on the “Ed Sullivan Show” and the effect it had on our love of music and bands like the Grateful Dead. He plays guitar in three or four rock bands. He and Don Connery had become close friends. In January of 2021, Connery died at the age of 94.

Fifty years ago, Barbara Gibbons was [brutally murdered in her home](#). If that wasn’t bad enough, her son Peter was wrongfully accused of the crime and convicted. Perhaps there is a silver lining in this double tragedy.

Most Americans don’t know this, but the U.S. Supreme Court permits police by law to outright lie about evidence to suspects they interrogate in pursuit of a confession. “You failed the polygraph,” “Your fingerprints were found on the victim,” and “Surveillance footage places you at the scene” are some common but brazen lies told to children and adults. Predictable from basic psychology research, this tactic has induced countless innocent people to confess to murders and other crimes they did not commit.

This past summer, Connecticut became one of just a handful of states to pass a bill that prohibits police from knowingly presenting false evidence to suspects under the age of 18 (they also may not misrepresent the law or make promises of leniency). It’s about time.

Fittingly, reform advocate Peter Reilly strongly supports this legislation, which Gov. Ned Lamont signed into law in June. “Nearly 50 years later,” Reilly had earlier written in the Connecticut Post, “I am appalled that Connecticut still allows these tactics to be used against kids. The cases of Connecticut’s exonerees, including myself, demonstrate that confessions derived through deceptive tactics cannot be trusted.”

This new law, set to take effect in October, will memorialize Barbara Gibbons and Peter Reilly in the best of ways. Aimed at preventing wrongful convictions, the benefits to future generations will stand as an enduring legacy.

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