



Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Vol. 49, No. 5, pp. 468–479, October 2011

Perske's List: False Confessions From 75 Persons With Intellectual Disability

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In 2008, I published a list of 53 false confessions (Perske, 2008). The list presented in the present article contains the names of an additional 22 persons with intellectual disability who were coerced into confessing to major felonies that they did not commit. Of the total of 75 individuals reported on here and in the 2008 paper,

- 65 have been exonerated.
- 29 have been exonerated by DNA tests
- 5 of them (Jerome Bowden, Walter Correll, Girvies Davis, Barry Fairchild, and Cornelius Singleton) were convicted before many investigation techniques (including DNA testing and the videotaping or police interrogations) were developed and applied to such cases.
- 1 person (Joe Arridy), in a very old case, received a posthumous pardon from a governor. His action may inspire others to seek posthumous pardons for individuals who were wrongly executed in the distant past.

This list keeps growing, thanks to lawyers who have become more sensitive to such wrongfully convicted persons and volunteer to fight for their innocence and freedom. Also, there is a heartening wave of Innocence Project organizations that are springing up throughout the nation.

The 22 additional individuals are listed here alphabetically, along with the state and date in which the confessions were made

Joe Arridy (Colorado, 1936): The Happiest Man Who Ever Lived on Death Row

Two girls, 13 and 15, were bludgeoned while sleeping in the same bed in their Pueblo, Colorado home. The older girl was raped and killed. Three days later, the Pueblo police caught the killer and recovered the murder weapon, but he refused to confess. Shortly after that, a sheriff in Wyoming picked up a vagrant, Joe Arridy, 21, who was loitering in the Cheyenne railroad yards—and got him to confess to the Pueblo crime. The police then announced that the crime had been carried out by two men. Arridy was identified as “an imbecile with an IQ of 47,” who had recently wandered away from the Grand Junction State School for Mental Defectives. He had climbed into a railroad boxcar and disappeared. After the conviction, Warden Roy Best found Arridy to be a vulnerable, 5'3", 130-pound

nonviolent man. The warden chose to look after him like a father. He introduced Arridy to reporters as the happiest man in his care. He joined with Attorney Gail Ireland, who managed to get nine stays in a little over one year. Even so, the governor ordered the execution of Arridy on January 6, 1939. On January 7, 2011, 72 years later, Colorado Governor Bill Ritter, Jr., after studying all the records on the case, issued “a posthumous pardon” ([Perske, 1995](#); www.friendsofjoearridy.com).

Jesse Barnes (Maryland, 1972): Innocence Project Fights for an Exoneration After 38-Year Imprisonment

Barnes, who was labeled as a “mentally defective and dropout special education student” was convicted when he was 17 of the rape as well as the bloody neck and throat slashing of his 15-year-old girlfriend. Interrogators received two dissimilar confessions. The conviction was based only on the one that was typed by an interrogator. Witnesses who could have provided Barnes with an alibi did not testify. Lawyers from an Innocence Project did their own investigating and discovered that the victim had not been raped. They learned later that the earlier interrogator concocted the rape in order to make a stronger case. The defense lawyer described Barnes as “very timid, shy, very quiet, mannerly, and respectful.” Because DNA testing was not an option in 1972, the Innocence Project lawyers are asking the court to review the case in the interests of justice ([Kiehl, 2009](#)).

Jerome Bowden (Georgia, 1986): Too Early to Save

On October 11, 1976, a 55-year-old woman was brutally beaten with a pellet rifle and stabbed to death in her Columbus home. The next day, the police arrested a 16-year-old next-door neighbor. They found the pellet gun, the knife, and a wig the killer wore as well as coins and jewelry that the teenager had taken. They also recovered the victim's TV that the teenager sold to a pawnbroker. The teenager confessed to the crime. Then he told interrogators that Jerome Bowden, 24, committed the crime with him. Bowden was an easy-going, neighborhood-wandering person who had been expelled from school many years earlier after being given a Wechsler intelligence test that showed him to have a full-scale IQ of 59. No evidence linked Bowden to the crime, and he could not have read or understood the confession drafted for him by police. The teenager, being a minor, was sentenced to life without parole. Bowden was executed ([Perske, 1991a](#)).

Anthony Caravella (Florida, 1983): Saved by DNA

A 58-year-old woman was raped and murdered in Miramar, Florida. Detectives picked up Anthony Caravella, a 15-year-old with an IQ of 67. Witnesses observed interrogators grabbing a phone book and taking Caravella into another room. They also heard what sounded like phonebook slaps and yelling. After repeated sessions, the detectives came out with five statements. During the sentencing, the judge exclaimed, “I will tell you, Anthony, if the jury had recommended death, I would have executed you.” Later, when he was found innocent, another judge spoke more tenderly: “Let me take the opportunity to apologize to you for the criminal justice system of the State of Florida” ([McMahon, 2010](#)).

Walter Correll (Virginia, 1985): Appointed Lawyers Fumble the Case

In a drug sale that went bad, two buyers admitted killing the dealer. Then they claimed that Walter Correll was with them as the overpowering ringleader. Correll was small (5'6" and 130 pounds), had a reported IQ of 68, and was known as “a wimp.” The victim, who was over 6-feet tall, had been choked

and stabbed from behind. The trial judge appointed two defense lawyers who turned out to be wimps too. They conducted no investigation. They claimed that communicating with Correll was impossible. When the attorneys asked Correll about the crime, he curled up in a corner and cried. The lawyers testified in court that after that, they threw up their hands and gave up. Correll was executed for being named as the ringleader. The other two received lesser sentences ([Perske, 1991b](#)).

Anthony Dansberry (Illinois, 1991): Signs Confession When Told It Was a Release

An Oak Park woman was getting off a bus when a man knocked her to the pavement, grabbed her purse, and fled. The victim later died from a head injury. A woman in a car saw the attack and pursued the robber in her car. She claimed that he touched her car twice with his hands. She described the attacker as a Black man about 18 to 20 years old, and she helped police draw a composite sketch. Anthony Dansberry was not involved until the police received an anonymous tip, and he was placed in a lineup before six eye witnesses. The woman in the car was the only one who identified Dansberry—even though he was 29-years-old and had a mustache and beard that did not appear in the composite drawing. Dansberry was also a man with a verbal IQ of 58 and the reading comprehension of a first or second grader. He was interrogated until he signed a confession written by a detective. He said he signed the paper because the police told him it was “his release.” He was convicted and given a 75-year prison term. Innocence Project members are now interested in the case (M. [Possley, 2006](#)).

Girvies Davis (Illinois, 1978): Confess or Get Shot

Three days before Christmas 1978, in Belleville, Illinois, an 89-year-old retired farmer was shot to death in his wheelchair in his trailer home. There were no witnesses, no weapon, no fingerprints, and no motive. Eight months later, in August 1979, Girvies Davis, a 20-year-old Black man was arrested after a theft in an auto supply store. He had a severe “organic brain dysfunction since birth that kept him close to being illiterate. While in jail, police said he passed a note to them through a guard confessing to 11 crimes—including “the old man in the trailer.” After that the police checked him out of jail at 10 p.m. (the logs at the jail confirmed this) and drove him to a deserted road outside of town. The police, Davis said, took off his handcuffs and leg shackles, drew their guns, and produced a stack of written confessions. They told him if he did not sign all of them, they would shoot him and then testify that he died trying to escape. Davis signed everything they had. He was only tried for the shooting of the elderly farmer, which he vehemently denied. No Blacks were allowed to serve on the jury. He was sentenced to death. He died saying, “I have done many bad things, but I'm no murderer” ([Schwartz, 2006](#)).

Selwyn Days (New York, 2001): Saved by DNA

In 1996, a man, 79, and his 35-year-old companion were stabbed to death in their Eastchester, New York, home. After the case was still unsolved for 4 years, the police picked up and interrogated Selwyn Days, 36, a man with brain damage and a low IQ. After long hours of questioning, he confessed to the crime in front of a TV camera. He received a sentence of 50 years to life. Innocence Project lawyers presented DNA test findings to the court that excluded Days. Also, four witnesses placed Days in Goldsboro, North Carolina, at the time the crime was committed. This man spent 10 years in prison for a crime he did not commit ([Stashenko, 2010](#)).

Edward Lee Elmore (South Carolina, 1982): After 38 Years in Prison, Innocence Project Groups Enter the Case

A 75-year-old widow was murdered in her Greenwood, South Carolina, home. She was raped and stabbed 32 times, and her body was dumped in a bedroom closet. A neighbor suggested that the police check the stubs in the White woman's checkbook. They found a record in the victim's checkbook showing that she paid Edward Elmore, a 23-year-old Black man, for doing yard work a few days earlier. He was picked up and questioned within 48 hours of the crime. Four months later, Elmore, who had recorded IQs of 72 and 58, was sentenced to death. After the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002), the death penalty was changed to a life sentence. During the last 38 years of incarceration, numerous questions have emerged. The autopsy report had been botched. Hairs found on the body disappeared—and were found later in an investigator's filing cabinet. The DNA on the hairs proved to be from a White man. An FBI expert who studied the state's earlier forensic report against Elmore called it a “fraud” ([Bonner, 2002](#)).

Barry Lee Fairchild (Arkansas, 1983): Beaten Into False Confession?

Acting on information given by a “confidential source,” Barry Fairchild was arrested and questioned regarding the rape and murder of a 20-year-old White U.S. Army nurse in a field outside of Little Rock, Arkansas. Fairchild was Black and his records indicated that he was a man with retardation—a full scale IQ of 63, a verbal IQ of 69, and a performance IQ of 61. With his head bandaged, he was placed in front of a video camera. Investigators said the bandages covered a “bite on the top of the skull by a police dog.” During the videotaping, Fairchild kept looking toward an off-camera person for guidance. Later, Fairchild recanted, saying that the confession was beaten out of him. No evidence connected him to the crime. Testing of the semen in the victim's body showed that the rapist had type O blood and Fairchild's was type A. On March 29, 1991, on ABC TV's *20/20*, he described how 13 Black men signed affidavits stating that the police tried to beat confessions out of them for the murder of the nurse—and failed. Fairchild was the 14th, and the only one to give in. He was executed in 1995 ([Perske, 1991d](#); [Encyclopedia of Arkansas History, 2010](#)).

John Floyd (Louisiana, 1981): Innocence Project Finds Exculpatory DNA

On Thanksgiving Day 1980, two men were murdered in New Orleans in different locations. The crimes were remarkably similar. Both men were White and had been involved in homosexual acts at the time of their deaths. Both were stabbed in the neck and torso. Two months after the crime, the lead detective happened to visit with John Floyd, a Black man, in a bar. He took Floyd in for questioning and got him to confess to both murders. He has been in prison for 30 years. Recently, the [Innocence Project of New Orleans \(2010\)](#) began looking into the case. They found that Floyd had an IQ of 59 and psychological tests showed him to be “highly suggestible and highly compliant,” making him particularly susceptible to the sort of pressure applied by police when they interrogate. Mitochondrial DNA testing now shows that Floyd did not commit either crime. Consequently, the case is back in the courts and the Innocence Project lawyers have vowed to never give up until Floyd walks out of the penitentiary a free man.

Paula Gray (Illinois, 1978): Saved by DNA

Police picked up this 17-year-old with intellectual disability for questioning based on a tip. After 2 nights of intense interrogation, Gray confessed that she was with four men who had abducted a man and woman, raped the woman, and killed them both. Under pressure, she fingered four men as

perpetrators. All were convicted. Seventeen years later, DNA revealed that Gray and the four men were innocent. The same evidence implicated the real perpetrators, who eventually confessed (Frievoegel, 2000).

Charles “Chucky” Hickman (Indiana, 2005): Saved by DNA

On January 25, 2005, in Crothersville, Indiana, a 10-year-old girl disappeared while walking to a store. She was later found in a local lake. She had been sexually molested and drowned. Hickman, 20, was questioned, and he immediately blurted out that he was the murderer. Although it was clear from records that he was “a vulnerable, malleable, and disabled person” who was “very slow with the mental capacity of a 15-year-old,” he was submitted to numerous interrogation sessions. In them, his story kept changing, according to the leading questions he was being asked. This wild, interrogational spree ended for good after DNA on the body of the girl was matched with the real perpetrator (Adams, 2006).

Tommy Lee Hines (Alabama, 1978): Innocent but in a Legal Limbo

On May 23, 1978, Tommy Lee Hines, a 25-year-old Black man, wandered away from a day program center for persons with developmental disabilities in Decatur, Alabama. He walked up to a window of a building, looked in, and scared an office secretary. The secretary called the police, who took him away for questioning. According to investigators, Hines confessed to raping three White women. In each case, the women claimed that the perpetrator overpowered them in their own cars, drove them to the outskirts of town, and raped them. Records showed that Hines had “an IQ of 35 and the mental functioning of a six year old.” His father testified that “They had Tommy driving a car. That boy can't even ride a bicycle.” Members of the local Association for Persons With Disabilities rose up in indignation. Then a contingent of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference marched onto the scene. Finally, they were confronted by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Four men were shot but not killed in the clash that followed. Somehow, Hines' case became so cluttered by pressure from outside forces that true justice was ignored. He was sentenced to prison, where he was attacked. Later, he was judged to be incompetent to stand trial and was sent to a mental health hospital that expelled him as not being one of theirs. He was then sent to an institution for persons with intellectual disability, where he was rejected as well. Hines was placed in a small group home in a small Alabama town while all legal forces apparently looked the other way (Perske, 1991c).

Lebrew Jones (New York, 1987): A 20-Hour Interrogation While Physical Evidence is Ignored

Here is a case that can make modern day Innocence Project workers cringe. Two decades ago, a 21-year-old prostitute was savagely murdered at a Times Square building project. A mountain of physical evidence was found. Lebrew Jones, a security guard at the project, was brought in for questioning, even though the crime happened 6 hours after his shift ended and he had gone home. The police interrogated this trusting and gentle man, whose IQ was 68, for 20 solid hours. According to reports, Jones was invited to share how the crime happened, and he did the best he could. Early on, he suggested that the woman beat herself to death with a rock. As of the date of this article, not a single shred of physical evidence has been tied to this utterly nonviolent man. Even the mother of the murdered girl met with Jones and was convinced that the wrong man was in prison. By the time an Innocence Project team discovered the case, he had spent 22 years in prison and was close to parole. So they spent their time and effort to successfully win the parole. (Young, 2008).

Levon “Bo” Jones (North Carolina, 1987): Death Penalty Based on a Single Snitch

A career snitch was paid \$4,000 for her testimony that Bo Jones, a Black farmhand with a low IQ, murdered a White man. Jones spent nearly 16 years on death row. His first defense attorney was so inept that he failed to raise numerous bits of evidence pointing toward Jones' innocence. Later, another lawyer picked up the case and the scene changed. The snitch recanted her story of Jones' involvement in the crime. A massive amount of critical evidence pointing to Bo's innocence was heard, a federal judge overturned the conviction, and in 2006 Bo walked out of prison a free man (Levingston, 2010).

Daniel Lackey (New York, 2003): Convicted for a Rape and Stabbing That Never Happened

On January 16, 2003, a woman was cut with a knife and raped in Oneida, New York. Dan Lackey, 31, a man with a reported IQ of 73, was brought in for questioning, and he “wrote out” a confession. He was charged with first degree aggravated sexual abuse and received an 8-year prison sentence. Three years later, the female victim reported another attack. The attacks were identical, right down to the description of the man and the wounds inflicted. By then, it was discovered that the woman suffered serious psychiatric problems, including hearing voices and attempting suicide. She finally admitted that the attacks never happened. The knife wounds in both cases were self-inflicted. Lackey's release came after 4 years in prison. Afterwards, the state attorney general stated in court papers that “Lackey's conviction was brought on by his own conduct including giving a written confession” (O'Brien, 2009).

Richard Lapointe (Connecticut, 1989): Centurion Ministries Refuses to Give Up

On March 8, 1987, in Manchester, Connecticut, an 88-year-old woman was raped, strangled, and stabbed 11 times. Her cottage was set on fire. The crime was obviously committed by a strong and athletic person. On the 4th of July 1989, the police picked up Richard Lapointe, 46, the step grandson of the victim. After 9 hours, investigators came out with three dissimilar confessions—all written by the police. All who know Lapointe would say that he is about as nonathletic as one could be. He has Dandy-Walker syndrome and has undergone five surgeries to drain excess fluid from his enlarged head. He is 5'4", wears thick glasses, and has hearing aids in both ears. He never runs. When he stops short or turns quickly, he gets dizzy. When he was younger, the other kids gave him the nickname “Mr. Magoo.” Even so, Lapointe was found guilty, sentenced to life plus 60 years, and has been in prison for 20 years. Currently, all attorneys involved earlier have testified to being inept in their defenses. Now, the case has been picked up by Centurion Ministries, who are known nationally as the first Innocence Project organization in the nation (www.friendsofrichardlapointe.com).

Godfrey G. Miller, III (Maryland, 2004): Eager to Please Police Officers

Twelve days after a man was beaten to death in a rooming house, police officers picked up Miller, a 20-year-old man with an IQ between 66 and 69, who almost immediately confessed to the crime. After Miller spent 269 days in jail, the confession fell apart and the real killer was arrested. Usually, defense lawyers feel a sense of satisfaction from such victories and then go on to other cases—but not Miller's lawyer. He was angry. He went before the city council and castigated the police department's handling of the case. According to the lawyer, Miller had no police record or history of substance abuse. “He had had only good experiences with the police—making him eager to please

them, which led to the confession.” Even then, Miller's lawyer did not stop. He said that he would like to see “an experienced counselor with the mentally disabled train officers in questioning such suspects.” The lawyer then demanded money from the city to help put Miller's life back together again. All this led to a shouting match in the council chambers, with Miller's lawyer threatening to sue. Later, the chief of police promised to conduct an investigation of city officers involved in Miller's case ([Chansanchai, 2004](#); [Lyons, 2004](#)).

Jesse Misskelley (Arkansas, 1993): False Confession Tactic Dooms Three

Jesse Misskelley, 17, reported to have intellectual disability (IQ of 70), gave in to a classic, old-time ploy. An interrogator told him to testify against two friends, Damien Echols, 19, and Jason Baldwin, 17, for the murder of three Cub Scouts on May 6, 1993, in West Memphis. If he did, the officer promised he would not go to jail. He talked but the promise was not kept. He and Baldwin were sentenced to life plus 40 years because they were minors. Echols, being an adult, was given the death sentence. The victims were found naked in a drainage ditch. They were tied together with shoe strings. The prosecution hinged on the confession riddled with factual errors and testimony by a Satanic cult expert with a mail-order degree, while angry citizens gathered and cried out “Burn in Hell.” Through the years, fresh facts have been emerging. No DNA has connected the three to the crime. What appeared to be a Satanic act was attributed to animals chewing the dead flesh. A parent of one murdered child who studied the crime now feels the three are actually innocent. Even so, no court has yet ordered a retrial ([Dewan, 2007](#)).

Tyler Sanchez (Colorado, 2009): “Force-Fed” Confession is Only Evidence

In July 2009, Tyler Sanchez, 19, was picked up and questioned by Parker, Colorado, police for a break-in and fondling assault of an 8-year-old girl. There was DNA, but none of it belonged to Sanchez, a small slender redhead, and the victim described her attacker as being much taller and older with dark hair. Most important, Sanchez was a “slow talking, hearing-impaired and intellectually disabled man.” The only evidence was People's Exhibit No. 1, an 11-sentence confession he gave after a 17-hour interrogation. According to a reporter, “Sentence by sentence, it parrots the detectives, echoing verbatim details they admit they repeatedly fed him during their interrogation” ([Greene, 2010](#)). The case is still going to trial.

Devontae Sanford (Michigan, 2007): Contract Killer Takes Blame

When four people were killed in a drug den in Detroit, Michigan, 14-year-old Devontae Sanford was home with his mother. Later, the special education student with a developmental disability was taken in by the police. After numerous hours of questioning, Sanford's final completed confession was videotaped. He pled guilty and was sentenced to a term from 37 to 90 years. A year later, a professional contract killer claimed that he murdered the four persons in the drug den. When evidence was compared, Sanford purportedly told the police that he shot the victims with an M14 rifle. The real killer used an AK47 and a 45-caliber pistol. A police investigator testified that Sanford was innocent ([Hunter, 2009](#)).

Antonio Santiago (California, 2009): Bomb Threat Fizzles

It was a quick and clean case. A telephone call to a Caltrain customer-service operator claimed that a bomb was on one of their trains. A bomb squad swung into action, but found nothing. Later, the call

was traced to a Pacifica man, 26-year-old Antonio Santiago, a man with intellectual disability. After being interrogated, he gave officers a solid confession. They reported that Santiago, while bored and sitting around with friends, suddenly decided to make the call. Santiago pleaded “no contest” and faced 6 months in jail. A later follow-through showed that the police traced the wrong phone number. It was off by one digit ([Melvin, 2010](#)).

Cornelius Singleton (Alabama, 1922): Too Early for Modern Forensics to Save

In 1977, Sister Ann Hogan was killed while praying in a Mobile cemetery. Eye witnesses identified a man thought to be the killer as White with blonde hair, but Cornelius Singleton, an illiterate Black man with an IQ between 55 and 65 was picked up. He was taken to the cemetery and then to the police station, where he was questioned for many hours. Finally, an attorney dictated the sentences, one by one, that Singleton parroted back while another investigator wrote them down. He was led to believe that he had signed a confession to stealing bed sheets at an earlier time in his life. He unknowingly waived his right to a defense counsel. He never received an independent investigation. His conviction was overturned when the U.S. Supreme Court voted against execution in 1972. In 1981, he was retried and sentenced to death again. He was executed in 1992 ([Farrell, 2000](#)).

James Thompson, Jr. (Maryland, 1988): Police Reward Leads to Wild Confession (Soon to Be Saved by DNA)

When the police offered a \$1000 reward connected with a rape and murder, James Thompson claimed he found the murder weapon. This turned out to be a big mistake, considering that earlier in life, he “suffered a serious head injury and was low functioning” ([Tamber, 2007](#)). Investigators took him in for questioning and came out with a bizarre confession that led to rape and murder convictions for himself and a close friend. Recent DNA tests show that the semen in the victim belonged to a third person. Also, outside of the confession, no forensic evidence linked the two with the crime. Both remain in prison.

David Vasquez (Virginia, 1984): Saved by DNA

Detectives approached Vasquez, 37, reported to be a man with mental retardation, while he was cleaning tables at a McDonald's restaurant in Arlington. They asked him to come to headquarters with them. With a taperecorder running, the detectives described to Vasquez the murder of a woman who had been raped and strangled with a venetian blind cord. They then confronted him and told him there was evidence showing that he was the killer. Too naive to believe that policemen would lie to him, he broke down and cried for his mother. Three intense interrogations took place. During the third one, he went into a dreamlike state. His meek, pleading voice became low pitched and steady as he described how he killed the woman. Later, the police connected the crime to the real perpetrator with the first successful use of DNA testing. Vasquez received a pardon on January 4, 1989, 5 years to the day after the detectives approached him at McDonald's ([Mones, 1995](#); [D. Possley, 1989](#)).

A Haunting Conclusion

I am a man who has spent 51 years in close contact with persons who have intellectual disability. I started out working for 11 years as a chaplain in institutions in which these people were expected to live out their lives. I loved working with these individuals, and I still do today. I loved writing about them, too (see www.robertperske.com). Then, when society began to move individuals with

intellectual disability into better lives in the community, I went along. I gradually became what I saw as a self-styled citizen advocate for individuals with intellectual disability who got into big trouble. The interest drew me into street, courts, and prisons all across the nation. I focused on and wrote about individuals who had been wrongly charged for crimes other people committed.

There is one single issue learned from all this that seems to be burned into my brain. I first learned about that issue in an incident that occurred in my own family many years ago. As a young dad, I lectured my five kids about putting my woodworking tools back on their assigned hooks in the garage after they used them. Once, when one of my tools was missing, I railed at the son who failed to put it back. I was rough on the little guy. I harangued and harangued him and I didn't let up... until my wife softly took my hand and led me to the place where I had left the tool!

After sitting in many courtrooms, I have sensed how that wily little rascal, "the will to believe," can corrupt the true facts of a case. I long for the day when the gaps between all the wills of persons in a court case can be naturally diminished before the court arguments begin when dealing with people who have intellectual disability.

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