

Richard Lapointe—An Unlikely Killer in a Cellblock With Real Ones

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On May 13 and 14, 2008, major Connecticut media outlets described how a prisoner was stomped to death in MacDougall Correctional Institution's lunchroom. It was quick and awful—and the guards could not get to the melee fast enough to stop it. After learning about this human tragedy, I felt heavy hearted for two reasons.

First, after visiting MacDougall regularly for almost 17 years, I felt sadness for the institution's correctional officers. I have watched how, with every coming year, staffing and support resources have been diminished. These creeping cutbacks have kept committed officers from fulfilling all the correctional skills for which they were trained. As that happens, the officer morale goes down and prisoner lockdown time goes up.

Second, I have a close friend who eats in that prison lunchroom. He is also housed in a "pod" that is reserved for high-security prisoners, mostly killers. My friend has observed numerous explosive situations on his pod. When they happen, he has been known to cower in a corner or hurry to his cell door, hoping that none of the violence will spread to him.

His name is Richard Lapointe. By all of the letters of the law that have been applied to his case, my friend is believed to be a raging, highly athletic killer. He has been deemed so bad by the courts that he is living out a sentence he can never complete—life without parole plus 60 years.

Those of us who know him and care about him swear that he is a soft little man who is far from athletic. He does not have a mean bone in his body. He is a 63-year-old, 5'4", pudgy man with an up-and-down thickness that even includes his head. He wears thick glasses and hearing aids.

He grew up in Hartford, Connecticut's Charter Oaks Housing Projects where the other kids nicknamed him "Mr. Magoo." For many, he became the object of taunts and tricks, but the kids living close by sensed his vulnerability and they became his protectors.

Lapointe has an intellectual disability called Dandy-Walker syndrome. Anyone understanding this syndrome knows that a portion of the vermis, the tissue connecting the cerebellum to the temporal lobes of the brain, is missing. He has undergone five brain surgeries that were needed to shunt excessive fluid pressure from expanding his skull and damaging his brain. No clinician diagnosed this dilemma until he was 15 years old.

He likes to walk, but he never runs. If he gets up or stops too fast, he experiences dizziness that he calls "a rush." He has a hard time tackling abstract problems, but he is a whiz at seeing his world in concrete terms and relying on authority persons to help him fill in the blanks.

He, in his concrete way, is forever worrying about how much snack money he has or does not have in his commissary account. At other times, he good naturedly voices an avalanche of puns that his mother taught him, rote style, after he was expelled from the Hartford public schools.

As for his reliance on authority figures, police officers were always at the top of that list. As a dishwasher in Manchester restaurants, he enjoyed chatting with police when they stopped in for a meal or cup of coffee. That is why, when Lapointe was picked up for questioning by the Manchester police on July 4, 1989, he became putty in their hands.

The first interrogator took him into a room and immediately accused Lapointe of savagely raping and murdering Bernice Martin, the grandmother of Lapointe's wife, in her tiny Manchester apartment. Lapointe never believed that a policeman would lie to him like that.

After perhaps an hour of interrogation, the detective printed in large block letters, "ON MARCH 8, 1987, I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR BERNICE MARTIN'S DEATH AND IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. MY MIND WENT BLANK." Although Lapointe could not read, he signed the confession.

In a later confession, Lapointe tried to say all the things that the detective wanted to hear. Even so, he still tried to be true to himself when he ended a more elaborate confession by saying, “If the evidence shows that I was there, and that I killed her, then I killed her. But I don’t remember being there.”

After knowing Richard Lapointe for almost 17 years, I ache for him. No physical evidence connected him to the crime. He lives in prison because of three confessions he gave to officers in one-on-one sessions in a closed room. No video or audio devices were used that could help judges and juries to see and hear what really went on during 9 grueling hours of interrogation.

The Richard Lapointe who I know never beat Ms. Martin in the face with his fists. He never took a piece of cloth, formed a ligature rope around her neck, and cinched it tightly with a knot that only a trained Boy Scout might tie. He never lashed together her wrists tightly in the same fashion. He never stabbed her nine times in the back and once in the stomach. He never ripped the clothes off of the lower part of her body. He never raped her with a blunt object. He never masturbated on the bed and carpet. He never used a blunt object for a second time to strangle her. He never burned the handle off of a knife. He never carried her 160-

pound body into another room and set her apartment on fire in three different places. He never sprinted for the normal equivalent of five city blocks to his own home so he could calmly sit down with his wife and son and watch the Sunday night *National Geographic* feature on television, with no blood, the smell of smoke, or any dishevelment of his clothes.

I accept the painful fact that honest justice and justice determined by the letter of the law can be two different things. Even so, I will never cease to wonder if there is any power in the state of Connecticut that can remove this discrepancy in Richard Lapointe’s situation.

After all, life without parole plus 60 years is an very long time. It would be a sad situation if Richard Lapointe dies in prison for a crime he could not have even begun to commit.

For a more complete background on this case, go to <http://www.friendsofrichardlapointe.com/>.

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