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**Central Park Five, Lapointe: Confessions Don't Mean They Did It**

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It seems impossible, to most of us, that someone would confess to a crime he didn't commit. It's crazy, right? And yet it happens all too often. Suspects — alone, afraid, confused, unsophisticated, tired, hungry, vulnerable — eventually admit to a crime they had nothing to do with.

One of the most dramatic and infamous examples is recounted in a new book, "The Central Park Five: A Chronicle of a City Wilding," by Sarah Burns. Ms. Burns, a 2004 Yale graduate, tells the riveting, painful story of the five teenagers who were arrested and sent to prison for the brutal rape and beating of a woman who was known for years as "The Central Park Jogger," before she (and others) revealed her identity as Trisha Meili.

The five, all but one of whom were juveniles, served sentences of between six and 13 years, only to be exonerated when another man confessed to the crime and was conclusively tied to it with DNA evidence. The five youths had given false confessions.

In following this well-crafted narrative, I was struck, among other things, by the uncanny parallels to the Connecticut case of Richard Lapointe. Lapointe is the meek, mentally handicapped Manchester man who was arrested in 1989 for the heinous rape and murder of his wife's 88-year-old grandmother, Bernice Martin, in 1987. His conviction was based almost entirely on highly dubious confessions.

In New York, on the night of April 19, 1989, a large band of teenagers entered the park, up to no good. They hassled bike riders, threw rocks at cars, beat up a male jogger and beat an older man, a homeless alcoholic. So when police discovered that a white female jogger had been raped and beaten to within an inch of her life, the boys were brought in. Thus far, not an implausible presumption.

Over many hours, police extracted confessions from five of them. They knew nothing of the legal system; all thought if they told police what they wanted to hear, the police would let them go home. They said they were threatened, sworn at, lied to by police — all of which is legal. They were tired, hungry and scared. In a couple of cases, police got the boys' parents to help get a statement.

The statements were inconsistent with one another, and were strongly at odds on every major detail with how the crime was committed.

Lapointe was held, alone, in the Manchester police department for more than nine hours. His confession also differed significantly from how experts say the crime was committed.

But in both cases, it didn't matter. They had confessed, so they must be guilty. "Studies have shown that confessions are a uniquely persuasive form of evidence when presented to a jury, even in the face of contradictory physical evidence," Burns wrote. The Central Park trial had a stunning piece of contradictory physical evidence — DNA from semen on Meili's sock that didn't match that of any of the five teenagers.

But DNA testing was still in its infancy then, and prosecutors were able to get past the revelation, and keep focusing on the confessions.

One of the tragic aspects of the New York case is that if police had been able to step back from their theory of the case and ask if they had it right, they might have saved a great deal of suffering. There was another young man, Matias Reyes, a violent serial rapist, on the loose at the time. He'd committed rapes similar to the Central Park assault, and would rape at least five more women afterward, killing one of them, before being captured.

In 2001, Reyes admitted to raping the jogger in Central Park; and indeed it was his DNA on Meili's sock. The charges against the five youths were vacated in 2002.

Lapointe is still in prison. A series of appeals for a new trial have all failed, most recently in April. Like the NYPD, the state criminal justice system has never been able to review its position, to admit it might have gotten the wrong man. Yet there are tantalizing reasons to do so.

Manchester police initially investigated a violent career criminal named Frederick Rodney Merrill, but dropped him after a state investigator told them Merrill had a different blood type than that found in a semen stain on Mrs. Martin's bedspread. Merrill was seen in the area that weekend, and three nights later committed a similar violent assault on a woman in South Windsor.

Partial DNA samples from a pair of men's gloves found at the Manchester crime scene didn't match Lapointe's, and a pubic hair found on Martin's clothing didn't belong to either Martin or Lapointe. Might it have been Merrill's?

Yale political science professor David Cameron, who has studied the case, urged the state to compare the partial DNA profiles from the gloves and the pubic hair with each other and with offender profiles in the state's DNA database, and examine the ligatures used to tie up Martin for "touch DNA" — the DNA in skin cells left by the perpetrator as he tied her up.

At least do these tests. There is a strong chance the man has been in prison for 22 years for a crime he didn't commit — like the Central Park Five.

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