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## **A Question of Justice: Cellmates' Word Sent Woman to Jail Second of two articles**

**By Athelia Knight and Leon Dash, Washington Post Staff Writers; Staff writer Ted Gup contributed to this report.**

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ST. LOUIS -- On the third day of 1983, Ellen Reasonover voluntarily came forward as a potential police witness here in the brutal murder of a gasoline station attendant. Today she is serving a prison sentence of 50 years without parole for that murder, which she claims she did not commit.

Reasonover, 26, a welfare mother with no previous convictions, was pronounced guilty last December even though the trial produced no witnesses placing her at the scene of the crime, no fingerprints and no murder weapon.

The motive was said to be robbery, but no money was taken from the cash register and about \$3,000 was left in an unlocked safe. The state sought the death penalty, arguing that the 135-pound Reasonover fired seven shots from a rifle and brutally beat the 6-foot-8 attendant; but the prosecutor said recently that he was not certain she had pulled the trigger. Reasonover was said to have had two accomplices, but neither was brought to trial.

The jury that sent Reasonover to prison relied almost entirely on the words of two women who shared cells with Reasonover on separate occasions after her arrest and testified that she had confessed to them.

A six-week investigation by The Washington Post, while not establishing Reasonover's innocence, has uncovered new evidence that raises serious questions about her alleged jailhouse confessions. Also, like the case of Maurice Williams, reported in The Post last week, Reasonover's experience raises questions central to the fairness and efficiency of the criminal justice system, not only here, but nationwide.

The women to whom Reasonover allegedly confessed--Rose Carol Jolliff, 32, and Mary Ellen Lyner, 36--have long criminal records and histories of drug addiction, and benefited from their testimony: Jolliff by getting a \$1,000 reward, Lyner by receiving a reduced sentence.

Five other women inmates, including three who were in the small cells with Reasonover when she allegedly made her confessions, said in interviews with The Post that they never heard her say anything incriminating during her time with them. On the contrary, all five said, she

repeatedly proclaimed her innocence. Police and prosecutors interviewed two of the five, but discounted their statements and tried to discredit one of them. None of the five was interviewed by defense lawyers or asked to testify at Reasonover's trial.

Marquita Butler, the third person in the cell when Reasonover allegedly confessed to Jolliff, told The Post that police investigators later played her a tape-recording of Jolliff's statement and asked her to corroborate it, offering her a reward to testify. She said she was tempted at first, but declined.

"They promised me some money, I'm not sure how much it was, but you know, I went for it. I was going to lie," Butler said in a recent interview. "But then, I thought about it, and I said, 'You can't lie like that on that girl, 'cause you don't even know her . . . I wouldn't want her to lie on me, so I didn't . . . When I heard what Jolliff had said, I thought about myself . . . and I said, 'No, you can't do that.'"

And I told them not to call me anymore. I believe they got kind of mad about it, but I didn't care."

Carolyn Coats, one of several women in a small holding cell with Reasonover when she allegedly confessed to Lyner, said she heard nothing incriminating. "She was telling me, 'That's not the way it happened,' and 'I'm not guilty,' and I told her I believed her," Coats said in a recent interview. "I said: 'I believe you, but I still don't want to hear about your case, and I advise you not to say anything to anybody else about it' . . . Every time somebody would come in it seemed like she was talking to people."

Coats and two other women in the jail said they thought Lyner was a police informer. "She was a snitch," said Coats. "I talked to her. She seemed like a very intelligent person . . ."

Lyner, who left jail in July after getting a reduced sentence on forgery charges, declined to discuss the case. Reasonover's conviction is being appealed, and "I feel I have a vested interest not to do anything that would hinder or help the appeal," Lyner said. "I don't want to go through another trial."

Jolliff, who left St. Louis shortly after testifying at the Reasonover trial, could not be found. Her sister and children in Mishawaka, Ind., said they did not know her whereabouts. Her attorney, Stormy White, said Jolliff stood by her courtroom testimony.

The assistant St. Louis County prosecutor who headed the Reasonover case, Steve Goldman, said he considered Jolliff an "excellent" witness who "had nothing to gain" by testifying against Reasonover, but did so only because she thought "it was a horrible crime." According to Goldman, Jolliff was unaware of the reward money when she spoke with the police. Lyner, he said, "probably would have gone to the penitentiary" and "benefited greatly by testifying."

He said Butler "cannot be believed" and that it did not surprise him that Coats and the other three women denied that Reasonover made incriminating comments. "Typically, when people are in

jail, they're going to try to help the other person out," he said. ". . . They are not going to say something unless they are going to have something to gain."

The prosecution's reliance on the testimony about confessions made Reasonover's an "unusual case," Goldman said. But he is convinced of her guilt. "There's no doubt in my mind," he said. ". . . When I asked for the death penalty on her, I thought that, you know, I wouldn't have felt comfortable in doing that unless I thought she was guilty or at least involved in the murder, if not the actual killer."

Several officials on the prosecution side, including Goldman, said Reasonover has a rarely seen violent streak that they claim emerged the night of the murder and has resurfaced a few times when she threatened officers and prison guards. 'I'm in Here for No Reason'

Since her conviction, Reasonover has become something of a cause celebre in St. Louis, her claims of innocence publicized by advocates in the black community who say she was steamrolled into prison because of her poverty, naivete, lack of education and race. In a total of five interviews with three different Post reporters, she came across as a soft-spoken, if somewhat vague and confused, woman who says she will soon be proven innocent and set free.

"Sometimes I go to sleep at night and I cry 'cause when I think about it, it bothers me . . . that I'm in here for no reason at all," she said in an interview at Renz Correctional Center in Cedar City, Mo. "My whole life has been taken away from me, and what hurts me the most . . . makes me kind of feel like I'm stupid . . . trying to be a good citizen for the police . . . and they've turned around and did this to me."

How Reasonover ended up serving 50 years is a story of a woman who came forth as a witness in the early-morning murder of a gas station attendant, three days later was arrested for that murder, a day later was released for lack of evidence, a month later was arrested a second time for an unrelated service station robbery, five months later was convicted of that robbery and then was convicted of the murder for which she was first arrested.

It is a story of police detectives who, without hard evidence, placed Reasonover at the scene as a suspect after she told them that she had seen two suspicious-looking men at the station when she had gone there in search of change to use at a laundromat. Police began to press Reasonover after the men she had picked as suspects gave ironclad alibis. Her story began to change; she failed a polygraph test, and then Jolliff and Lyner surfaced with their reports of Reasonover's confessions. The Killing

On Jan. 2, 1983, between 1:45 and 2 a.m., Vickers gas station attendant James A. Buckley, 19, was shot seven times and bludgeoned in the back room of a station in the suburban St. Louis town of Dellwood.

A customer who stopped by about 2 a.m. found Buckley's body sprawled on the concrete floor. He had bullet wounds in his left arm, lower back and chest and a cut on his head. Several pieces of rifle stock were found underneath his body, and spent .22-cal. cartridges were scattered about

the floor. About \$3,000 was left in an unlocked safe, money was still in the cash register, and a small quantity of marijuana was on top of boxes in the cashier's booth.

The killing was reported on local news. People who had been at the station early Jan. 2 were asked to call police, who had begun interviewing Buckley's relatives and friends. Some friends told them that Buckley, a college student, sold small amounts of marijuana. Police concluded that he was not a big-time dealer and discounted drugs as a motive for the killing.

Reasonover, who said she had been at the station that night to get change to use at a nearby laundromat, heard the news reports on the murder. She said she told her mother about two men she had seen at the station when she went for the change. Her mother, Elizabeth, said she told Ellen that she should call the police and tell them what she had seen. Reasonover did. Seeking to protect her identity, she gave the fictitious name Sheila Hill and told the officer that she had seen two men and a car. The officer asked her to call Capt. Dan Chapman later that day.

The same morning, Kenneth Main, a customer who had been in the station sometime between 1:40 and 1:45 a.m., also contacted the police. He told them that a man had been with attendant Buckley then, and that Buckley seemed to have a look of distress in his eyes, as if he wished Main would not leave. The man's description was similar to that of one of the men Reasonover had reported seeing.

Police were anxious to talk to "Sheila Hill," but she had not called back. They put her name on the news, asking that she contact them. Reasonover heard the broadcast and telephoned Chapman at 10:10 that night. She again identified herself as Sheila Hill and told Chapman that she had been reluctant to talk to the police because she feared being hurt by whomever committed the murder.

Chapman said there was a \$3,000 reward for help in solving the murder and asked her to come to the station. She told him she was not interested in the reward money, but agreed to the meeting.

When she arrived, Chapman asked for identification, and Reasonover said she had used the false name to protect herself from reprisal. She told Chapman she thought she recognized one of the two men from her old neighborhood in St. Louis. The police showed her a mugshot book of more than 250 black men who had been arrested in St. Louis. She picked out two who she said looked like the ones she had seen at the station. A second witness also picked out one of the same two men as resembling the man he had seen that night.

Police gave Reasonover a polygraph test to determine if she was telling the truth about being at the Vickers station that night, and she passed it.

"We thought the case would be wrapped up with the two people" she had identified, Chapman said in an interview. "And the polygraph proved she was there and she saw what she did. She did see the people at the station . . . She was an excellent witness to us." Suspicions

Police looked for the two men Reasonover had identified, and found them in the city workhouse.

They had been in custody at the time of the murder. The two were put in a lineup so Reasonover and the second witness, Kenneth Main, could view them.

She picked out one of the men, but could not identify the other. Main was unable to pick out anyone from the lineup. Chapman told Reasonover that the two men could not have committed the murder because they were in jail at the time. After viewing more mugshots, Reasonover picked out a third man.

The police found the man, put him in a lineup, and Reasonover picked him as the man she had seen at the station. But this man had a firm alibi as well. By now, Chapman was suspicious of Reasonover, who had positively identified three men who, as best he could determine, had nothing to do with the murder.

Reasonover, in recent interviews with The Post, said she had repeatedly told police she could not positively identify the men. She said she had picked out men who looked somewhat like the men she had seen at the station that night. "He Chapman told me if someone's eyes or nose looks familiar, just pick them out and we'll go ahead and check on them," she said. Chapman denied that he told Reasonover to pick out anyone who looked familiar.

A small fact involving the getaway car made the police more suspicious, Chapman said. A patrol officer discussing the case with a detective said that the car described by Reasonover was similar to one that Reasonover's ex-boyfriend, Stanley White, had been in when he broke a window in Reasonover's parked car after an argument with her a week earlier.

"We knew there was more of a problem with the identification because Ellen didn't tell us about this car and she is describing it perfectly," Chapman said. "And we didn't even know about Stanley White at this point. Then we go to Stanley White because he is using this car, which is a perfect description of the one she's given us that night. And then he matches the description given by" witness Main.

On the night of Jan. 6, White was picked up by the police and placed in a lineup viewed by Main, the customer who had seen a man with Buckley just before he was killed. Main picked out White and a second man looking like the man he saw in the station.

The next day, Main was hypnotized and re-interviewed by a doctor with a detective present. Afterward, Main told police he was 99 percent sure that White was the man he had seen that night.

The police became increasingly suspicious of Reasonover. "Ellen was telling us that when she pulled off of the lot, a police car was coming down and drove alongside of her," Chapman said. "The policeman was going to know, when he finds out about the murder--this is a few minutes before the body was found--and he's going to put her coming off this lot. So she came in as a witness" to try to throw police off her trail. "We feel that is the reason she called."

Reasonover said she came forward not to throw police off her trail but to assist them in solving

the murder. She said she did not see a police car go by as she pulled off the lot. However, she said, as she drove on West Florissant Avenue she saw a police car a few blocks ahead of her. She said she stayed behind the police car because she had a broken tail light for which she had received a warning and did not want to be stopped again.

Police began to check Reasonover's background. She had worked at a Vickers service station in 1978. One night, the station manager accused Reasonover and her boyfriend of robbing the station. Reasonover and her boyfriend maintained that they were falsely accused by the manager because of an earlier argument between him and the boyfriend. In an interview last month, Larry Freeman, an investigator with the county prosecutor's office, said he had checked out the case and determined that Reasonover was telling the truth. No warrant was issued for Reasonover in that matter and the case was dropped. The Women's Statements

On Jan. 7, the day after Reasonover's ex-boyfriend White was charged with the murder, Reasonover was given a polygraph test, which she failed. She was charged with capital murder and robbery. At this point, prosecutor Goldman said Reasonover "flew off the handle" and cursed the police officers. She and White were placed in adjacent cells and the police eavesdropped on their conversation. Both maintained their innocence.

That night, around 10 o'clock, Reasonover was placed in a cell in the Jennings police station with Rose Jolliff and Marquita Butler. Before Reasonover's arrival, Jolliff and Butler had been talking about their lives on the street, according to Butler. Both had histories of drug addiction and had been arrested at one time or another for stealing hams to get money for drugs. Jolliff had been locked up two days before on an outstanding warrant for failing to pay an \$84 fine in connection with her ham-stealing case. According to Butler, Jolliff complained that her relatives would not bail her out of jail.

Jolliff, the mother of three children, had started using heroin in 1972, according to her husband, Christopher Jolliff. Since 1975, she had been charged with crimes including stealing, passing bad checks and mail fraud. She had been in a methadone treatment program for five years, ending in August, 1982.

Butler said in a Post interview that when Reasonover came into the small cell that night, Jolliff stopped talking to her and focused on Reasonover. " Jolliff wouldn't even talk to me no more, 'cause Reasonover came in there talking and when she said what she was in there for, I mean, Jolliff stuck to her like glue."

The next morning, Reasonover was taken out of the cell and soon released for lack of evidence. A police officer approached Jolliff and asked her if Reasonover had said anything about her case.

Investigators talked to Jolliff. She said she had heard about the murder on television and about Buckley being shot seven times. Jolliff also told police Reasonover claimed that she had done the shooting and that she had been at the station with two other men.

One of them had failed to distract station attendant Buckley as planned, Jolliff said Reasonover

told her. She said Reasonover said she had to shoot the attendant seven times with a rifle because he had seen her and knew her, since she lived nearby. Jolliff told investigators that Reasonover also said they had beaten the attendant. She also told them that Reasonover said she had robbed another Vickers station where she once worked and knew the setup. Reasonover, Jolliff said, also talked about her 2-year-old son. (Reasonover does not have a son.)

A police detective, James Eichelberger, told Jolliff that she would be eligible for the \$3,000 reward if the information she had given them led to the arrest and conviction of the persons involved. Jolliff told him that she would be reluctant to testify because she feared for her life. Eichelberger mentioned the possibility of the police and the prosecutor offering her some protection and perhaps relocating her.

"Some of the things she related she only could have heard from the person who committed the offense, because Rose Jolliff wasn't there and she had to hear it from somebody," Chapman said.

After Jolliff came forth, the police did not immediately rearrest Reasonover. They needed more evidence, Chapman said.

On Jan. 9, prosecutor Goldman interviewed Butler, who failed to corroborate Jolliff's statement, even after hearing the tape of Jolliff's interview with Eichelberger.

On Jan. 13, Chapman telephoned Butler at home. At this point, Chapman later said, the police had determined that Butler was not a credible witness and that she was only interested in the reward. He said he thought she would say anything for money and that he wanted to make sure that the police had a statement from her in case she decided to testify on Reasonover's behalf. Chapman said they needed a contradictory statement "that would make Butler's testimony useless in court."

In the taped conversation, Chapman told Butler that there was a \$7,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the person responsible for the murder. Clearly interested in the reward money, Butler waffled on what she heard Reasonover say about the matter, telling Chapman that she needed money to fix her car and for an apartment before she would cooperate with the police.

"Shoot, I don't even have a decent place to sleep," Butler said at one point.

"We'll get you a place to sleep," Chapman said. "But we want to know what you heard in that cell."

Later in the conversation, Butler said, "You know that girl ain't shot that guy . . . . She hasn't got enough heart to shoot that dude."

Chapman talked with Butler and later with her boyfriend in two phone conversations, but the pair kept asking for money before Butler would cooperate.

In an interview last month with The Post in a visiting room at the county medium security facility, Butler said she initially told police that Reasonover had mentioned something about the crime because the police had offered her money. "Back then I was desperate and I wanted some money," said Butler. "But I wasn't getting up on the stand and testify against this woman."

Butler said the police gave her the details of the crime before seeking a statement from her that would corroborate Jolliff's. "The police gave me all the information I needed to lie," she said.

That charge was denied by the police and prosecutor. "They don't spoonfeed her with all the details of the crime," prosecutor Goldman said. "It just would defeat their whole purpose." However, Goldman said they had played a tape of Jolliff's statement for Butler after Butler told them she had not heard Reasonover implicate herself in the murder.

"I mean, it isn't like we were playing it to see if she'd change her story," Goldman said. "We wanted to know the truth . . . She kept saying I didn't hear her specifically admit to some of these things." The Second Holdup

A month after Buckley's murder, a Sunoco service station in another St. Louis suburb was robbed of \$423 by a woman who took the money from the cash register while two men distracted the two attendants outside. An attendant, Chuck Zeiter, told the police that the woman was about 25 to 30 years old, 5 feet 10, 150 pounds, and had short curly hair and a dark complexion.

On Feb. 7, Chapman showed the two attendants eight photographs, including one of Reasonover, who is light-skinned, has shoulder-length hair, weighs 135 pounds and is 5 feet 8. Zeiter identified Reasonover as the woman he had seen in the station. The second attendant could not identify any suspect.

The next day, police arrested Reasonover at her home for the Sunoco robbery. She denied that she had robbed the station and said she was at the movies with her daughter, her girlfriend and her girlfriend's sons when it occurred. That evening, Zeiter picked Reasonover out of a police lineup.

In an interview with The Post, Ellen Palmer, 26, a cellmate who stood beside Reasonover in the lineup, said: "After the lineup we went upstairs . . . She said, 'I didn't do that.' She said, 'I don't know why they doing this to me.' "

The next day, Reasonover, prosecution witness Lyner, Carolyn Coats, Rose Winston and Ellen Carpenter were in a small cinderblock waiting room in the county court building, between court appearances. During that time, Lyner told prosecutor Goldman two weeks later, Reasonover made threatening comments about the man who picked her out of the lineup and said to her: "I need a good attorney. I think I'm going to the penitentiary. We robbed a gas station and I killed a man; you know that Vickers station--I stay down the street from there."

Reasonover said she had never talked with Lyner in the waiting room. In interviews with The Post, Coats and Winston said they did not hear Reasonover make such comments in the room,



where even a whisper can be easily overheard. Lyner told police that Coats, Winston and Carpenter were present when Reasonover made the statement.

Winston, in a telephone interview from her home last month, said, "I didn't hear nothing like that . . . . I really would have heard it if they said that while I was there. Nobody said anything about a lineup. I would have heard it."

Coats, who is serving 15 years for armed robbery, said Reasonover seemed to have a compulsion to talk and constantly proclaimed her innocence. "I guess she was reaching out for someone to understand her or listen to her," said Coats. "I told her she shouldn't do things like that."

Lyner said a corrections official and a police detective asked her on two separate occasions if Reasonover had told her anything about her case. She told them that Reasonover had, but refused to give them details until she could talk to the prosecutor to work out a deal in exchange for her testimony.

Lyner knew the system. A college graduate from a middle-class St. Louis suburb, she had become a heroin addict and fell into crime to support her habit. She had been in and out of the city and county jails since 1977 on charges including passing bad checks, check and credit-card forgery, and stealing. Though she had eight felony convictions, she had never spent a day in the state penitentiary. Three years ago, her life of crime, drug addiction and unsuccessful efforts to rehabilitate herself was the subject of a five-part series in the St. Louis Post Dispatch.

When Lyner finally talked about Reasonover to prosecutor Goldman, she was facing a maximum of 28 years in prison if convicted on four forgery charges. After Lyner gave her statement, Goldman agreed to recommend to the judge that she be sentenced to one year in jail for the pending cases in exchange for her testimony against Reasonover.

In Post interviews, a police detective and three former cellmates of Lyner said she was known as a police informer. Goldman said he found Lyner to be credible. He said Lyner's comments about Reasonover's threats were consistent with threats that Chapman and another detective, Dennis Welling, said Reasonover had made against them.

In an interview, Chapman said that when they talked with Reasonover on Feb. 10 after she had been charged with the Sunoco robbery, she threatened to harm him, Welling and their families.

Reasonover said she had never threatened the detectives. "That is not true," she said. "I was crying and said, 'All you are doing is trying to put a case on me.' I would never threaten a police officer."

On Feb. 25, Reasonover was indicted for capital murder and robbery in the Vickers service station case. The same day, an undercover policewoman posing as a convict was wired with a tape recorder and placed in a cell with Reasonover to try to elicit a confession. The conversation was inaudible and the policewoman reported that Reasonover basically denied her guilt, saying that she had two "bad brothers" and that someone was always trying to blame "stuff" on her. The

policewoman told Goldman that Reasonover said the police didn't have any evidence or witnesses putting her at the scene of the crime.

Last July 12, Reasonover went to trial on the Sunoco robbery. She was found guilty and sentenced to a maximum of seven years in jail. On Nov. 28, the murder trial began. Reasonover did not testify because her family feared that she would become flustered under cross-examination. The jury found her guilty of capital murder.

Before the jury began deliberating whether she should serve life in prison or be executed, Reasonover took the stand and told the jurors she had not committed the murder. The jury deliberated three hours, but was unable to agree on a sentence. The judge sentenced her to 50 years without parole.

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