



F7 Mad (Forensic) Scientist and Murder: A Case of Suspected Innocence After 22 Years

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand what constitutes a viable *Brady* Claim; that is, what to look for in the files of police officers and forensic scientists, and how to use that information in a legal framework based on personnel files and forensic psychological analysis of the police officers' and/or forensic scientists' fitness for duty at the time of the criminal investigation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by shedding light on a problem that is rarely spoken of or investigated — the mental health of forensic scientists and how it may impact their conclusions, in turn affecting the court and undermining its task of seeking just outcomes in criminal matters.

In 1993, James Parsons was convicted of killing his wife, Barbara Parsons, in the bedroom of their home. It appeared that the assailant hit Mrs. Parsons in the head 15 times with a heavy object. Her husband, James, was investigated and claimed to have been away from home working at his auto repair shop during the time in question. This criminal case had remained unsolved for 12 years, when G. Michelle Yezzo, a forensic scientist on staff at the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation, claimed that she had solved the murder mystery. Using chemical enhancements to find previously undetected bloodstains on a large mechanic's tool and a blood spatter analysis on a sheet reportedly belonging to James and Barbara Parsons, Yezzo gave testimony in court that proved pivotal to the murder conviction. Yet, at the time of this murder conviction, a close review of Yezzo's personnel records revealed that her colleagues and supervisors repeatedly questioned her investigative methods and conclusions. Specifically, some raised the issue that she tended to present evidence with a prosecutorial bias, and she appeared to make mistakes that may have led to "a substantial miscarriage of justice." Moreover, Yezzo's personnel records were replete with many instances in which she exhibited disturbing behavior toward her colleagues. It got to the point that some questioned her mental health, especially during the time she was investigating and came to conclusions leading to the criminal prosecution of James Parsons. It was Yezzo's findings 12 years after the killing that led to Parson's eventual arrest and prosecution. Only circumstantial evidence had been considered until Yezzo's bloodstain analysis on the suspected murder weapon and bed sheet was offered. Interestingly, at the time Yezzo was getting ready to testify in the Parson's murder case, she was investigated and suspended for threatening a coworker.

Twenty-three years later, Ohio Innocence Project attorney, Donald Caster, studied the James Parsons murder conviction. He found that Parsons consistently maintained his innocence and his children never believed their father had killed their mother. Caster was able to obtain the personnel files of Yezzo, and he was shocked by what he found. He hired a forensic psychologist, Dr. Scott Bresler, to review these personnel files, knowing that Dr. Bresler has performed many fitness-for-duty evaluations on persons in positions of trust and power (e.g., doctors, nurses, police officers, firefighters, air traffic controllers). In so doing, Caster established a viable *Brady* Claim and the criminal conviction of James Parsons was vacated after a judicial hearing with new evidence presented in open court. The legal framework for establishing this *Brady* Claim will be described, and the use of Dr. Bresler's analysis of Yezzo's mental state at the time she came to her weighty conclusions will be discussed.

***Brady* Claim, Innocence Project, Fitness for Duty**