

## **Paul B. Ebert**

Paul B. Ebert was born on September 23, 1937 in Roanoke, Virginia. Ebert's family moved to northern Virginia when he was two years old. He attended Virginia Tech for his undergraduate degree, and later went to George Washington University Law School, attending night school to obtain his degree. Paul Ebert had three children with his wife Priscilla, who died in 1983 of a heart attack. Ebert never remarried.

Ebert began his career in Falls Church, working for a law firm that eventually put a branch in Manassas, which then became the law firm of Ebert & Murphy. While working at this firm, Ebert took on part-time work as an assistant commonwealth's attorney. In 1967 Ebert ran against Floyd Bagley for the office of commonwealth's attorney for Prince William County and won, becoming the youngest commonwealth's attorney in Virginia at only 30 years old.

Paul Ebert prosecuted numerous notable cases, including the 1993-1994 separate trials of John and Lorena Bobbitt, as well as the 2003 trial of John Allen Muhammed, one of the DC snipers. Ebert became notorious for pursuing the death penalty in capital murder cases, securing this sentence for at least fifteen individuals, according to Ebert's count.

Paul Ebert retired in 2019, closing out over five decades as commonwealth's attorney for Prince William County. At the time of his retirement, he was the longest serving commonwealth's attorney in Virginia's history.

## Transcript of Oral History Interview with Paul Ebert (October 23, 2023)

**Interviewee: Paul Ebert (PE)**, Former Prince William County Commonwealth's Attorney

**Interviewer: Lauren Maloy (LM)**, Prince William County Office of Historic Preservation

**October 23, 2023 at 1 pm**

**Interview location:** Kathleen Seefeldt's home in Woodbridge

**LM:** Okay. I'm going to go ahead and start the recording.

**PE:** Okay.

**LM:** Okay. We're going ahead and starting the recording. Um, so, my name is Lauren Maloy, I work for the Prince William County Office of Historic Preservation and today I'm interviewing Mr. Paul Ebert at The Wellington in Lake Manassas, and it is August 22, 2023. Mr. Ebert, can you please state your name and then spell it for the recording?

**PE:** Paul B. Ebert. P-A-U-L, B as in boy, E-B-E-R-T.

**LM:** And Mr. Ebert, when and where were you born?

**PE:** I was born on September the (clears throat), excuse me, September the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1937.

**LM:** And where were you born?

**PE:** Roanoke, Virginia.

**LM:** What are the names of your parents?

**PE:** Paul Rodney Ebert and Margaret G. Ebert.

**LM:** When did your family move to northern Virginia?

**PE:** We moved here when I was about two years old, actually, they lived in Blacksburg, but the hospital where I was born was Roanoke. My father was from Roanoke, but he, he had, he was a dentist, he had a practice in Blacksburg, my mother was in school there. So I was two years old, probably about, whatever that makes it, 40? 41? Before the war was over.

**LM:** Okay, well this would be skipping ahead a little bit, but where did you go to college and where did you go to law school?

(Some overtalk)

**PE:** I went to Virginia Tech and I went to George Washington Law School. I went to night school.

**LM:** And how, how and when did you decide to become a lawyer?

**PE:** Huh. I started out to be a dentist. And then I went to one of the chemistry classes and it was pretty easy when I started. And one day I walked in and I didn't know what they were talking about, and I said, "I don't think this is for me." And I didn't want to look in somebody's mouth for the rest of my life, so anyhow, I just went, I went into business administration, about the most general practice they had there. And I had, I was in the cadet corps, I had a commission to go in the army,

and I decided to go to law school, and I resigned my commission and gave them their money back.  
(Laughing)

**LM:** (Laughing)

**PE:** So anyhow, that was it, and I had an uncle, actually a second cousin, but was old enough to be my uncle, who was practicing law, and he offered to help me.

**LM:** And around, around what year did you go to law school?

**PE:** I graduated in '63.

**LM:** And then when, when did you decide, or when did you move, to Prince William County, and when you moved to Prince William County, where did you first move to?

**PE:** We were over there on Robnel Avenue in the City of Manassas, but I lived up in what is now Tyson's Corner, that area, and that was a whole lot different then than it is now. This place was the boonies, and um, so anyhow, Bill Murphy, who later on became a judge, and was principal of the high school, and going to law school, he went to work for the same law firm I was clerking for during the day.<sup>1</sup> And he told me to put an office out here, and that was '65. So that's, that's how we wound up coming out here.

**LM:** In 1965. Okay, okay. And then, before we talk about your career, can you talk a little bit about your family, um, when you got married, and if you had children, how many children you had?

**PE:** Well, I, I've got three children, two girls and a boy. Um, they're three years apart, and I've got three grandchildren, two of them are twins.

**LM:** Oh wow.

(4:40)

**PE:** (Chuckling) But not identical, by any means. But anyhow, that's pretty much family background. My grandfather had a farm that what is now the Dulles Airport and, he, of course, that was taken for the airport and he got another place, but he ran a restaurant in what they call a tourist --- in Falls Church. My mother was born in Falls Church, or actually, Washington, but she --- in Falls Church, so that's why we came back here to start with.

**LM:** Okay.

**PE:** And, uh, she wanted to get out of Blacksburg, she thought it wasn't for her.

**LM:** Understand (laughing). It's not for everyone.

**PE:** Uh huh. Right.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Murphy: "Prior to being elected to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1971 for two terms, he served as Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney and was a partner in the law firm of Ebert and Murphy in Manassas. During his time in the General Assembly, his bill for the School of Veterinary Medicine at Virginia Polytechnic Institute was passed enabling the establishment of school." "In Memory of William Russell Murphy 1925-2008," <https://memorials.curriefuneralhome.net/Murphy-William/1460001/obituary.php>

**LM:** Do you, uh, do your children still live in the area? In Prince William County?

**PE:** No, I have a daughter, my oldest daughter is in San Francisco, she works for Visa.

**LM:** Okay. Oh wow.

**PE:** That's her home office. And she's been with Visa a long time, like 30 years I guess. But uh, and I have son that's in Oakton and I have a daughter in Warrenton.

**LM:** So not too far, except for the one ---

**PE:** No.

**LM:** Okay.

**PE:** That's why I'm here, I'm between the two kids in this area.

**LM:** Okay. Umm, so, starting to talk about your career, what were the steps in your career, I guess, after law school, but prior to becoming commonwealth's attorney.

(Some overtalk)

**PE:** Well, I always wanted to be a trial lawyer, and I did, I was going to be, basically specialize in personal injury. And I was going to go, I started to go to work on Capitol Hill, I had one of ---- and we were on our way over there, and my cousin we got to start talking, and he said, "well I'll give you a job but I won't pay you much." So I said, "well, turn around."

**LM:** (Laughing)

**PE:** And, so that's how I started. And I clerked for that firm, did title work, and just took any kind of job. And I took a job as a magistrate in Falls Church, and they'd call me at night when they needed a warrant, something like that. And Falls Church was so much different than it is now. But anyhow, that's how I wound up doing what I did. And then, when we were deciding to put a firm out here, my firm here, we had to buy a place, rent a place, really, first. And then I wound up buying the house that I still own, still have in Falls Church, I mean in Manassas. And uh, but, we had, we had the branch office right there across from the courthouse. And then I, I wanted to get some trial experience, so I took a job as an assistant commonwealth's attorney. And that was all part-time work. So you could, we were prosecuting cases and had our own private practice, had to worry, not make sure there wasn't a conflict. And that went on until 1980. And then the General Assembly decided they were going to make any county that had 25,000 people or more in it to have full-time constitutional officers.<sup>2</sup> And I, by that time I had a good practice, and I tried to get them to grandfather me, so did the commonwealth attorney of Chesterfield. And, um, but anyhow, he,

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<sup>2</sup> **15.2-1628. Attorneys for the Commonwealth and assistants in certain counties to devote full time to duties; no additional compensation for substituting for or assisting any other attorney for the Commonwealth or assistant.**

A. In counties having a population of more than 35,000, attorneys for the Commonwealth and all assistant attorneys for the Commonwealth, except volunteer assistant attorneys for the Commonwealth appointed by the attorney for the Commonwealth, shall devote full time to their duties, and shall not engage in the private practice of law. From Code of Virginia, Chapter 16. Local Constitutional Officers, Courthouses, and Supplies.

<https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacodefull/title15.2/chapter16/#:>

Philpott ran things in the General Assembly those days and he said he wouldn't hear of it.<sup>3</sup> So, that's how I wound up, in 1980 going full time. And in retrospect, I couldn't maintain a private practice and do my job properly. So he was right.

**LM:** As commonwealth's attorney.

**PE:** Yeah. But I enjoyed the trial work, and um, but we really needed more law enforcement. And, and they need more law enforcement today. But, um, the Sheriff's, sheriffs – no police department – and um, so anyhow the policy of the state was, when you got so big, they would not increase the number of deputies for sheriff. So Ralph Shumate<sup>4</sup> was Sheriff when I came here, and uh, so, anyhow, the Board, I went to the Board, talked to the County Exec, and they decided to form a police department. That was '68, no I guess '60, no '70, '70. And uh, then of course, then the Four Horsemen came on, they wanted to do away it, the police department.<sup>5</sup> And that went into big litigation, what have you, and but anyhow, we prevailed and the police department continued. But, but, George Owens was the first chief that we had.<sup>6</sup> And Charlie Deane, was, he came with Owens when they formed the police department, in fact probably the majority of the police department was former state troopers that came with George Owens. And he was, he was an investigator with the State Police at that time, and very well respected I thought. But anyhow, that's how it got formed. And then those people on the Board did not want the police department, that's when we had kind of a hassle, and on the when they, the so-called Four Horsemen took office, they fired a county judge, locked, changed all the locks in the courthouse, and tried to get rid of the police department. Long history of small town politics ---

(11:30)

**LM:** Well this is great, that's actually one of questions was asking about the Four Horsemen and also the police chiefs, uh, and uh, so yeah. Anything you have about them, because we actually don't have a lot about them.

(overtalk)

**PE:** The newspapers in this county – the *Journal Messenger* and the *Potomac News* – became full-time papers because of the Four Horsemen.

**LM:** Really?

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Lee "A.L." Philpott (b. 1919 – d. 1991) served in the Virginia House of Delegates for 33 years beginning in 1958 and was the Speaker from 1980 until 1991. <https://history.house.virginia.gov/members/8760>

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Gilbert Shumate, Prince William County Sheriff from 1960-1971. Tish Como, "Prince William County Sheriffs 1904-2004," *Prince William Reliquary*, April 2006, Vol. 5, No. 2.

<https://www.pwcva.gov/assets/documents/sheriff/004793.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Four supervisors on the Prince William County Board from 1972-1976 were known as "The Four Horsemen" for voting as a block and making massive changes to PWC government. Phillip Smith, "Riding Herd in Prince William County," *Washington Post*, January 29, 1984. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1984/01/29/riding-herd-in-prince-william-county/f8e03565-df30-41e1-9991-1df30c36e9bc/>

<sup>6</sup> "George T. Owens, founding police chief of Prince William County, Va., dies at 85," Bart Barnes, *Washington Post*, March 16, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/george-t-owens-founding-police-chief-of-prince-william-county-dies-at-85/2016/03/16/6043ae32-ea22-11e5-bc08-3e03a5b41910\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/george-t-owens-founding-police-chief-of-prince-william-county-dies-at-85/2016/03/16/6043ae32-ea22-11e5-bc08-3e03a5b41910_story.html)



Ejection proceeds as Ebert, Supervisor-elect Mauller grapple in board's chamber; Lenz lays his hand on Ebert

Image: *Potomac News*, Dec 3, 1971: Paul Ebert (middle in photograph) and then Supervisor-elect Ralph Mauller (right in photograph) in a physical fight during a December 1971 Board meeting. A debate over a special use permit escalated into Chairman Alvey ordering Mauller's removal from the meeting, a cause that Ebert took up himself. Mauller was one of the "Four Horsemen" referenced in this interview.

**PE:** Yeah. They were, they were weekly publications. But they needed – so much stuff going on all of a sudden, the papers were in demand to see what was going on.

**LM:** Do you remember about years, uh, they were on the Board of County Supervisors?

**PE:** Yeah, that would have been umm, '72.

**LM:** Just that year?

**PE:** Huh?

**LM:** Just around that time?

**PE:** No, yes, four, seven– they came in August on, in '72. But they had, not just the police department, they had a lot of other things that were controversial –

**LM:** Okay. Well one of my other questions was also, that I heard that, that the creation of the police department was partly your idea. And you've already kind of answered that -

**PE:** Yeah, well I always said, if the state isn't going to give us adequate law enforcement we gotta have something and a police department's the way to go. In Fairfax, and some of the bigger jurisdictions, already had police departments and they seemed to be pretty, pretty successful and provided good service to the community.

**LM:** Mmm hmm. Um, well, then moving ahead I guess – what year exactly did you decide to run for commonwealth's attorney and why did you decide to run?

(13:24)

**PE:** (Chuckles) Well, I really had no interest in politics, and so, uh, my boss was Selwyn Smith, and he later on became Secretary of Public Safety and uh, he also was a Circuit Court judge in his career – but anyway, he decided, he ran for State Senate, so there was going to be a vacancy, and Floyd Bagley had run against Selwyn the last time he was running for the commonwealth’s attorney.<sup>7</sup> So, so Bagley announced, and then all the cops and people I met – c’mon Paul, you gotta run --- encouraged me to run. And as soon as I announced some of the same people said “what are you doing? Nobody knows you.” (Laughs) But we had a good election. In fact, the biggest margin that I’ve ever had.<sup>8</sup>

**LM:** Really? In that first one?

**PE:** But uh - yes. A lot of factors play into an election. But anyhow, um, as I said I enjoyed what I did, and trial work is a lot of fun, for me it was anyhow. When I was defending people, before I became commonwealth’s attorney, I felt so much pressure. The wife would come in, the kids are crying, nine times out of ten Daddy is going to go to jail, and here I am trying to do my best to stem the tide, so to speak. And then when I became a prosecutor, it’s entirely different, if I had a good case I put it on, but if I didn’t I didn’t put it on. So, it, it’s determining what was the best interest of justice and what could be done, and then my career kind of blossomed, until we came to the blossom – the Bobbitt case, and that was a, that became a worldwide issue – issue, worldwide. Umm, in publication or knowledge, and people, people took it up – it became a woman’s rights issue, some people thought men’s rights, and people – before we went to trial, people were picketing the courthouse, it was quite a mess. And I had a, the Bobbitts kind of, I always said they kind of deserved one another. Both of them lacked, something – let’s put it that way. And I think she’s still around, and I don’t know about John. But they had different personalities. And I had a plea worked out, where they were both going to plead guilty together and get probation and counseling. And I went hunting that day, after we had the plea --- and I got back, and I got a phone call – “I’m sorry,” John Bobbit’s lawyer – his entertainment lawyers – would not let him plead guilty. So they changed the whole, we went through that rigamarole. And then of course the other big case I had was the sniper. But I had a lot of cases, I had fifteen cases resulted in the death penalty, and I wound up being sent all over the state with different cases. And uh, I guess I had some --- in my blood, I liked going to different jurisdictions to see different courthouses and people, and what have you.

(17:49)

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<sup>7</sup> “Selwyn Smith is one of the only two people who have had the privilege of serving in all three branches of government in the state of Virginia during this century. (Governor Albertus Harrison, deceased, shares this honor with Judge Smith.) Smith served as the Prince William County Commonwealth’s Attorney from 1960 to 1967, as State Senator from 1972 to 1975, as Secretary of Public Safety from 1976 to 1980, and as a PWC Circuit Court Judge from 1980 to his retirement in 1993.” From “One Life Touches Many,” Based on an interview of Judge Selwyn Smith conducted by Alissa N. Hudson in October 1999. Prince William County Bar Association. [https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews\\_4\\_3101647140.pdf](https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews_4_3101647140.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> “Ebert ran in that first election against Floyd Bagley and...became the youngest CWA in Virginia.” From “The Commonwealth’s Attorney Office,” Based on an interview of Paul B. Ebert conducted by Alissa N. Hudson in February 2000. Prince William County Bar Association. [https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews\\_10\\_1245813478.pdf](https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews_10_1245813478.pdf)

**LM:** You're, uh, touching on a lot of my questions, I'm sure you knew I was going to ask you about the Bobbitt case and the Sniper case. So I guess going back to the, the Bobbitt cases, uh, do you think those cases warranted the amount of attention that they got?<sup>9</sup>

**PE:** No. If she'd cut his ear off, you never would have heard about it. And when it happened, the investigator came in, as they always did, in a murder or some serious case, umm, that morning. And of course, nobody could believe it, and jokes started immediately. One of my assistant ----"she should be in a penal institution" and everybody on that jury had heard about a joke. I asked that question ---- and even today...uh, the President, I met, I was at a function where he was, we talked about it, and Governor Allen talked about it – jokes, basically. But it was – it actually is a very serious crime to maim somebody but on the other hand there were a lot of underlying circumstances that we often see in a court proceeding.

**LM:** Mm hm. And then I guess, so for locally, for here in Prince William County, uh I guess a famous author, Gay Talese came into town? Do you remember that?

**PE:** What's that?

**LM:** Gay Talese? I think is his name, came to town?

**PE:** Oh yeah, oh yeah.

**LM:** Can you talk about that, do you remember kind of the uproar that caused?

**PE:** Oh yeah, he, was a pretty well noted author. And, he, he was here, he was taking me to dinner quite frequently, and um, he thought it was an ideal situation – a man/woman conflict. So he intended to write something but as far as I know he never did. But he said, John Wayne Bobbitt, John Wayne, macho man. And you got poor little Lorena and uh, he thought he had a good set up for a book. But for some - I kind of lost contact with him. I don't know if he ever published anything after that.

**LM:** I'm not sure. I might have to see. Umm, and I guess, were there other media – obviously – there were a lot of media – the big TV personalities that came to Prince William, to...

**PE:** Oh yeah. A couple times I came out of my, my house – I lived about a block and half from the courthouse, and there'd be a couple reporters standing in my yard. And uh, guy from the *New York Times* - nice, nice people, don't get me wrong, but anyhow they're paid to do a job and they're trying to do the best they can.

**LM:** (Laughing)

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<sup>9</sup> Ebert is quoted in the Washingtonian article multiple times about the 1993-1994 separate trials of the Bobbitts, and the article also includes mention of writer Gay Talese (noted further in the interview) coming to town. Ebert was the prosecutor for both of the Bobbitt cases (John tried for marital sexual assault and Lorena for malicious wounding) and both were acquitted. Marisa Kashino, "The Definitive Oral History of the Bobbitt Case, 25 Years Later" *Washingtonian*, June 27, 2018.

<https://www.washingtonian.com/2018/06/27/definitive-oral-history-of-the-bobbitt-case-25-years-later/>



**PE:** So, but anyhow, when you get that much press on something there's a lot of pressure, phone ringing constantly. And a lot of people wanting to make an issue out of some portion of a high publicity case like that.

**LM:** Hmm. Does, is that pressure, or that media attention, interfere with how well you do or prosecute the case, or, um, how did that interfere with your job?

(Overtalk)

**PE:** No, no, we - in retrospect I would have done some things different, but umm, Lorena was a very sympathetic figure. She would come in the office and cry, that makes it, it was hard to communicate with her. And John always said, he said "the reason she did this to me must be because she loved me. She loved me so much. That's why she did that." And during the trial he came into my office and he said, "Mr. Ebert, I don't think she loves me."

(Both laughing)

**PE:** But you know, lots of anecdotes like that.

(Loud thump)

**PE:** Huh. Somebody fall down?

**LM:** Oh I hope not, gosh yeah that didn't sound good.

**PE:** People fall here like flies.

**LM:** (Laughs)

**PE:** Sooner or later I'll be one of them I guess.

**LM:** Oh. Well, a long time I hope. Well I'm going to go back in my questions since we skipped back and um, who provided you with best guidance on how to serve as commonwealth's attorney and what was that advice?

(23:30)

**PE:** Hmm. You know, I can't - I had a lot of good friends. Bob Horan was a good friend, he had, he was one of the best trial lawyers that I ever ran into.<sup>10</sup> And he could take one little piece of paper, he goes the whole trial with everything on a note. That's just the way he was. But, and he, he, I talked to him quite a bit. Umm, well, I had one case with a guy named Paul Evans who was a member of the ---- Gang, it was a television, young kids, wasn't anything violent about him, but Evans, Paul Evans, was, uh, I think his stage name was "Porky," little fat little kid, and anyhow, he went on, he couldn't make it as an adult actor. So he went on kind of a fraudulent scheming, get people to invest in stuff that didn't exist, things like that. But anyhow, I represented him when I had private practice, I was court appointed, but I was, Judge Paul Brown was the senior judge. Prince William was in a circuit. Fairfax, umm, Alexandria, and Prince William were in one circuit. And

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<sup>10</sup> Bob Horan was Fairfax County's Commonwealth's Attorney for over 40 years, and prosecuted Beltway Sniper Lee Boyd Malvo. Tom Jackman, "Longtime Fairfax prosecutor Robert F. Horan Jr. dies at 90," *Washington Post*, October 29, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2022/10/29/fairfax-prosecutor-horan-dies-dc-sniper-case/>

eventually they broke off into individual circuit. But Judge Brown was pretty much a mentor. He, he would call me into his office and counsel me, tell me what he thought I was doing wrong, so on and so forth<sup>11</sup>.

**LM:** Hmm. Umm, and I guess before we go too much, can you kind of explain what the role and responsibilities are for a commonwealth's attorney? What, what exactly do you do as a commonwealth's attorney?

**PE:** Well, commonwealth's attorney is the chief law enforcement officer in its jurisdiction and your job is – and there a lot of duties in the code that they have – but your job basically is to prosecute crimes and maintain law and order. And what's going on here lately with the big spike in crime is very concerning to me and I think to most citizens. And, umm, the – I'd probably be in jail now if I were still in office. Because I wouldn't put up with a lot of the stuff that goes on on the street. If you have a good police department and they do their duty you oughta be able to prosecute the case and do justice. Not everybody deserves to go to jail but the people who do violent crimes, my position was, they going to have something. And the state has done away with the death penalty. And there's a lot of anecdotal evidence that the death penalty in some cases was a deterrent to others. And, I – we could go on for hours, things that I witnessed and heard from people, and the people on the street – the word was “you don't come to Prince William.” ---- Seeing – of course I'm not in it anymore – seeing that a lot of people come here without regard about what might happen to them. But the *Washington Post* interviewed a guy – oh, I have the article – anyhow, he was a street perp in DC, he pretty much told the reporter, if you, if somebody can get the death penalty, they're not going to do what they plan on doing. And you got carjacking – we never had that. The big change that I saw was with drugs. When I first came here, nobody - very few drug cases, and most of those people coming in from outside. And after the Vietnam War, the use of drugs just exploded. And it continues to explode, now it's prescription drugs. And I don't know what the answer to that is going to be. But anyhow, you gotta have the laws, you've gotta enforce the laws, and that's what this country was founded on. A lot of countries don't have what we have. To have somebody be guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, there may be a mistake here or there, but that's very rare in a death penalty case for that to happen. People point to, say this case, and any death penalty case – I could get on a soap box here – but any death penalty case, they, the anti-death people continue to try to find nuances in what went wrong, and they get witnesses to change their testimony. And if you use, if any witness is in prison, you can bet they're going to have a real nice looking law clerk going in to talk to the, to that witness to get that witness to change his story if they can. But that's just part of the game.

**LM:** Well that was one of my questions about, I guess, why you feel and felt so strongly about using the death penalty in capital cases.

**PE:** Well and I don't take any pride in it. It just, like I said, I feel in a lot of cases that qualify as death cases that are not prosecuted. But the ones that I did prosecute, those were the ones that were unusual or more violent. You didn't hear much argument about Muhammed in not being entitled, in deserving of the death penalty. But in cases like that people see that, and then I think a lot of people

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<sup>11</sup> Judge Paul Brown sat on the bench for 35 years, 19 of which were on the Arlington Circuit Court. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/194510224/paul-douglas-brown>

who were in the service, particularly World War II, are pretty hardnosed. They feel that the death penalty is appropriate in certain cases. But there are certain people that feel very anti-death, it's ingrained in them. And that's fine. We should have that. But in order to serve on a jury a jury has to be able to say under oath that they can oppose death or they can --- And that system has worked, I think, pretty well. Anytime there might be, some, something that didn't happen, people say, most of the people that I've sent to the death penalty, before they got -- I'd honestly, they'd rather have death than stay in jail. But not many of them keep that philosophy. It's just -- people cling to life. (chuckles) A lot of people here clinging to life. But that's just part of human nature.

**LM:** How, how did it feel to be notorious for, how did that notoriety feel?

**PE:** What's that?

**LM:** How did it feel to be notorious for prosecuting these death penalty cases? Umm...

**PE:** Well, somebody was talking about that the other day, one of those papers came out with a picture of me and Muhammed -- I don't know if you saw that or not -- said, "Accused Murderer" with a picture of Muhammed, and "Confirmed Murderer," me. You know, that was the headline, and that picture was on the front page, *Washington Times* I think it was. But, anyhow, it's just crazy, it's controversial. But it's been a controversy for a lot of nations and a lot of states. And of course Virginia has taken the path no more death penalty.<sup>12</sup> But it is expensive. But I think in the long run there are cases that justify that.

**LM:** So going back a little bit to your earlier career, I think, for a time you served as county attorney as the same time as you served as commonwealth's attorney?

**PE:** That's what everybody does in the state.

**LM:** Okay

**PE:** Unless the local jurisdiction doesn't want the elected commonwealth's attorney to be its county attorney. Of course, I was, I served in that position until the Four Horsemen came along. And one of them said, "we gotta get rid of that damn Ebert." And they did, they did things that weren't legal in my opinion, and I'd tell them so. But that was kind of a crazy time. And Sheriff Hill was a police officer when I came here. He was with the City of Manassas. And he's done a good job, did a good job in his office, in my opinion.<sup>13</sup> And Charlie Deane was actually Chief -- we've had good chiefs, I think.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia abolished the death penalty in 2021. Veronica Stracqualursi, "Virginia governor signs historic bill abolishing death penalty into law," *CNN*, March 24, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/24/politics/virginia-governor-signs-law-death-penalty/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> Glendell Hill joined the Manassas Police Department in 1969, becoming the first Black police officer in Manassas as well as the first Black employee of Manassas. In 1974, he became a detective in the department. He joined the Prince William-Manassas Adult Detention Center, a new facility, in 1982, and went on to spend the next two decades of his career here, eventually serving as the Superintendent beginning in 1993. In November 2003, Sheriff Hill was elected as the Sheriff of Prince William County, becoming the first Black sheriff in Prince William County as well as the first Black person elected to a County position (Sheriff Glendell Oral History, May 2, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Charlie Deane was hired when the County established the police department in 1970, and became Police Chief in 1988. He retired in 2012, serving for 42 years in the police department, 24 of which were as Police Chief. "Board

**LM:** They were one of my questions, talking about, talking about all the law enforcement that you've worked with. And I have Police Chief George Owens –

**PE:** Well, with George Owens – sorry, actually when George Owens took Charlie Deane out of investigating, I called him up and raised hell, and he said “I agree with you.” He said, “But I've got plans for him. He's gotta learn more about law, about how to run a police department than how to investigate crimes.” And he was right.<sup>15</sup> And Charlie Deane continues to be a good friend of mine. And he picks me up here lots of time and takes me to the cottage. I've got a cottage down on the Northern Neck and I go there every weekend if I can.

**LM:** Really?

**PE:** But I don't drive anymore, so I gotta get, gotta get a driver.

**LM:** Well I had – umm, you've already talked about the Four Horsemen quite a bit, if you have any other stories, but I have a couple other individuals. Because I've heard you knew everybody who was anybody uh, pretty much in Prince William County or the state...

(37:33)

**PE:** Yeah, you know, when I came here there was one courthouse and that was the one in Manassas and they had spittoons in the courtroom. Now nobody used them anymore but the old lawyers – I mean, beautiful marble bases with brass, and they would chew tobacco and argue the cases and spit in the spittoon. But, those things disappeared, I don't know what the hell happened to them, but Judge Sinclair –<sup>16</sup>

**LM:** Do you have any other stories about Judge Selwyn Smith?

**PE:** Umm, well, he was somewhat of a war hero, wounded in Battle of the Bulge, one of those highly profiled battles. He was the best person I ever worked for, because he never bothered me. I mean, and I, it wound up I was taking on all the cases. I think he liked that and I liked that. Obviously not big cases, but, uh – he got beat when he ran for Senate by John Galleher who was an incumbent, and John Galleher, he owned the *Journal Messenger*, and he did all right, he kind of had a funny personality at times.<sup>17</sup> But, uh – there were some real characters in this county, I guess there still are. But everybody knew everybody. And I used to know, about 70-80% of the jurors, I would know who they were, their families, something about them. And before I was over it would be rare to know anybody. I might know one or two people. Or know of them. But, that's just kind of the

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Names New Police Station After Retired Chief Charlie Deane," *Prince William Living*, November 21, 2017.

<https://princewilliamliving.com/board-names-new-police-station-after-retired-chief-charlie-deane/>

<sup>15</sup> George T. Owens was the founding police chief of Prince William County, serving from 1970-1988. Bart Barnes, "George T. Owens, founding police chief of Prince William County, Va., dies at 85," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/george-t-owens-founding-police-chief-of-prince-william-county-dies-at-85/2016/03/16/6043ae32-ea22-11e5-bc08-3e03a5b41910\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/george-t-owens-founding-police-chief-of-prince-william-county-dies-at-85/2016/03/16/6043ae32-ea22-11e5-bc08-3e03a5b41910_story.html)

<sup>16</sup> Arthur W. Sinclair (1914-2011) was "the longest serving judge in Virginia at his retirement and adjudicated cases as a substitute judge until he was 90 years old." "In Memoriam *Arthur W. Sinclair*", Prince William County Bar Association. <https://www.pwcba.org/About/sinclair.php>

<sup>17</sup> John Gallaher ran for State Senate in District 25 (Prince William, Fauquier, and Stafford counties) in 1965 and 1967. <https://historical.elections.virginia.gov/candidates/view/John-Galleher/>

way things change. A more rural county everybody knows everybody. And, the prosecutor, the defense, and from what I've seen justice seems to prevail.

**LM:** Hmm.

**PE:** In fact in England, the jury system was set up because, a jury of your peers, people are supposed to know you, know what you do, know what kind of person you are, when they sat in judgment of you.

**LM:** So we talked a little bit about, uh, political endorsements. Obviously you're still politically influential, people still seek your endorsements. How many Republican candidates, about, do you think you've endorsed over the years and why did you choose them?

**PE:** What was the question?

**LM:** How many Republican candidates, which is opposite of your party, I believe, did you choose, and why did you choose to endorse them?

(40:59)

**PE:** I don't know that until this election I've endorsed anybody. But, of course I'm sitting up here in an assisted living place, but from what I'm seeing and what I'm hearing from people I respect, the law is not being enforced. And in order to have some, maintain some kind of order, you have to enforce the law. In my opinion if you don't do it, it's going to result in what we've seen in a lot of places. You see people go out of jail, they commit bad crimes, even before 24 hours, and that's not right. People are getting upset about it. And of course everybody, if your child has done something, sure you're going to try to aid that child. But on the other hand, victims of crimes have to have somebody to speak for them. And the only way they can get somebody to speak for them is to have the prosecutor do so. And one of the hardest things that a prosecutor has to face is to tell somebody that the case is not prosecutable, for whatever reason. And sometimes that happens. And you don't want to try a case that you can't win, because jeopardy ----. But, uh, in my career I've gone all over the state. And more rural counties seem to know what's right and wrong better than what I call egghead jurors. I always try to, I always liked blue collar workers on my juries if I could get 'em. And I'll never forget, I had a construction foreman, and he, the, uh, --- question, "could you impose death or something less than death?" and this guy says, "You talkin' guilty?" I said, "yeah." He said, "I'm talkin' death." (Laughs) So he's gone.

**LM:** (Laughs)

**PE:** But there are a lot of people that felt that way. And again, not knowing what's the background of anything, but anyhow. Time for me to leave when I did. And um, and I've had, of course I know a lot of people that are still in the office and used to be in the office. And I think ten judges worked for me during my career, may have been more. One of them wound up on the Supreme Court, Mary Grace O'Brien is still on on the Court of Appeals.<sup>18</sup> Jim Willett,<sup>19</sup> who's now a judge...umm, Steve

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Grace O'Brien was hired by Paul Ebert in 1985 in the Commonwealth's Attorney's office and went on to serve on the Virginia Court of Appeals. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Grace\\_O%27Brien](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Grace_O%27Brien)

<sup>19</sup> "On May 4, 2018, The Prince William County Bar Association sponsored the investiture of the Honorable James A. Willett to the Circuit Court in Virginia's 31<sup>st</sup> Judicial Circuit, which encompasses Prince William County and the

Smith<sup>20</sup>, Le Millette<sup>21</sup>, Wenda Travers<sup>22</sup>, uh, Jim Robeson<sup>23</sup>...a lot of people worked for me, and as an Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney, you get, you get to be able to make a judgment as to how people are and what's appropriate to serve justice. Basically I always said, unless it's a real violent crime, I'll give somebody a break. By that I mean, maybe it's the first time he committed an offense, be probation, and he wouldn't have to go behind bars. Once that probation was violated I didn't have much sympathy. And of course drugs seem to be more frequent now than it was years ago but it was always, a great majority of cases in this jurisdiction and others were either drug cases per say or drugs played a part in it, per say. A lot of people used drugs as an excuse for what they do.

**LM:** Well this is going to seem like a little bit of a jump, but we've talked about it already, and you know I'm going to ask you about the Beltway Sniper as one of the biggest cases that you've –

**PE:** What's that?

**LM:** About the Beltway Sniper?

**PE:** Yeah –

**LM:** And, umm, I guess, I read a quote that you said it was one of the most complex cases that you ever prosecuted.

**PE:** Well it was because it was so many violent acts, so many murders, and trying to put all that together. There's three of us that worked on the case solely, on the one in Prince William, of course other jurisdictions had...but uh, everyday for a year, somebody at the task force...the task force met up in Centreville. And we would go up, like I said, just about every day somebody would go up there. And a real good task force...we had a lot of ATF people, state people, Maryland people, Virginia people, umm...they had committed crimes all over the country. So I ended up going to a lot of these jurisdictions to talk to people as potential witnesses. And anyhow, of course Muhammed wanted to represent himself, when he first, it kind of surprised me and scared me. But he could be a pretty charming guy. And when you get a defendant up there talking to a jury about what he did, I always, you can't really object to it, the jury thinks you're beating up on the poor defendant. It puts the litigator in a bad situation. Well Muhammed, and those cases, people's lives meant nothing to

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cities of Manassas and Manassas Park." "Investiture of the Honorable James A. Willett," *Prince William Living*, May 7, 2018. <https://princewilliamliving.com/investiture-of-the-honorable-james-a-willett/>

<sup>20</sup> "Steven S. Smith is a judge of the 31st Judicial Circuit in Virginia," (2015-2023, 8 year term).

[https://ballotpedia.org/Steven\\_S.\\_Smith](https://ballotpedia.org/Steven_S._Smith)

<sup>21</sup> "Millette then served as a substitute judge and special justice for approximately six years...He then decided to go to the Commonwealth Attorney's Office..." From "The Road to the Virginia Supreme Court," Based on an interview of Senior Justice LeRoy F. Millette, Jr., By Kristina Keech Spitler in February 2016.

[https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews\\_34\\_2854434614.pdf](https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews_34_2854434614.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Wenda Travers worked for the Commonwealth's Attorney office and was a District Court Judge. Avis Thomas-Lester, "A Fireball on the Bench," *Washington Post*, October 4, 1990.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1990/10/04/a-fireball-on-the-bench/4cf70e0c-2ead-46ad-bd58-48dcefe79f5/>

<sup>23</sup> "Within a year of starting with Smith and Davenport, Commonwealth's Attorney Paul Ebert asked Robeson if he would "like to be an Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney, (ACA)." "It's Been a Good Ride," Based on an interview of Judge James B. Robeson by Alissa N. Hudson in November 2015. Prince William Bar Association.

[https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews\\_18\\_2187120593.pdf](https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews_18_2187120593.pdf).

him. And I always – there’s no evidence to it – I always thought he came to this area so he could kill his wife. She had left out there on the west coast, and brought the kids there, she was in hiding, so to speak. But he apparently found out. But they were killing people before they came here. I think he wanted to establish a pattern of murder so when he murdered her, she’d be just another victim. And, there’s no evidence of that, but that’s what I think happened. It’s circumstantial. And of course Malvo was pretty much influenced by Muhammed, but he was a criminal. He was committing crimes before he ever met Muhammed. And he got to be more prone to kill somebody than maybe Muhammed was depending on the circumstance. He became a better shot. But anyway, we had a – I always loved to fish and I had a boat. Every year, every year since that case had been tried, we had, those people who were on the task force, we went on a fishing trip and had a big time. And this year the weather was so bad we couldn’t go. But we hope to go before too long. Of course I’m in a situation now where I, if I get on a boat now I have to be careful, my balance is not that good. I sold my boat, what have you. But anyhow, wherever you go, people knew about the Sniper, but I think more people knew about the Bobbitts.<sup>24</sup>

**LM:** But you think the Sniper case was more important, obviously?

**PE:** Yeah.

**LM:** Umm...how long was the trial? Of Muhammed?

**PE:** Seemed like forever. We were, we were able to change the venue to Virginia Beach. We were down there at least two months, and to get the witnesses in shuffled in was a masterful job, to keep all those balls in the air, so to speak. And the task force did a wonderful job on that. And our local police department did a real job in participating and putting that trial together. But anyhow, I knew, when Meyers was killed, if the case was assigned to me, I knew it was going to be a long hard fight. It turned out that my daughter worked for the same company that Meyers did. And she happened to be about half a mile from the shooting. But for the grace of God, it could have been her. But, people were scared to death, and the chances of getting hit by a car were greater than them shooting you, but knowing that someone is out there at random shooting people, killing them purposefully rather than accidentally was very concerning to people. A lot of people wouldn’t go to the store, it changed their whole life. The night that they caught the snipers, that was a big night. We’d been all mixed up in all these jurisdictions where it happened. And, it’s amazing.

**LM:** I guess, unless there are other things that you want to say about that case...umm, is it true that John Allen Muhammed was the only execution that you witnessed in your career?

**PE:** No.

**LM:** No – okay.

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<sup>24</sup> The DC Sniper attacks occurred over a matter of weeks in October 2002, in coordinated shootings that killed 10 people. John Allen Muhammed and Lee Boyd Malvo were tried separately and Paul Ebert was the prosecutor for Muhammed’s Virginia case (Muhammed was also tried later in Maryland) for the murder of Dean Meyers, which occurred in Prince William County. The trial took place in Virginia Beach. Muhammed was found guilty and was sentenced the death penalty. Steven Kiehl, “Muhammad faces aggressive longtime prosecutor in Va.,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 12, 2003. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2003-10-12-0310120040-story.html>

**PE:** But everybody asked me when it was happening, are you going to watch him executed? I said, no, I don't see any, uh, reason for me to do it unless you need some help. But in Mohammed's case, a lot of the victims came to me, and I - if they, if the victims say, they wanted me to go with them - 'cause that's - to watch somebody die isn't easy. Same thing with Paul Powell? I don't know, you familiar with that case or not?<sup>25</sup>

**LM:** A little bit.

**PE:** Kristie, the daughter that he raped and tried to kill, she was a typical teenager. I got pretty close to her and her family, and I'd take them to dinner, and she'd say - "I don't want anything to eat." And then when the waiter got there she'd get the biggest thing on the menu. (Laughs)

**LM:** (Laughs) Smart.

**PE:** I often wondered what happened to her. She used to stay in touch with me, but uh, and I watched the, when Powell - actually, he was electrocuted, he chose that, and so did Elliot. Elliot, that family, was concerned enough that I went down there with them.<sup>26</sup>

(55:44)

**LM:** So you went to support -

**PE:** But I don't...to me, particularly death by injection...very mundane, just somebody goes to sleep. And there's nothing, no pleasure in it, those who are being executed, of course it's a physical infliction of death, but it brings some solace to people, sometimes. But there's a lot of cases that I had, that question was asked - "are you going to witness it?" I didn't see any reason to do it. It's out of my hands at that stage. An attorney general takes over all of the appellate work on any case.

**LM:** Okay, so you went to support the families of the victims?

**PE:** Right, right.

**LM:** And you've talked a little bit about some other cases, but what are some other cases that do stand out to you in your career?

**PE:** Well, God, I'm trying to think the names of them. The one case where uh, Trooper Cavazos was killed, and I keep thinking, it's a routine traffic stop, and the person whose name I can't remember right now, wound up killing him, that's a police officer's worst nightmare, to walk up to a

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<sup>25</sup> In January 1999 in Manassas, Paul Warner Powell killed Stacie Reed and raped and attempted to kill Stacie's sister, Kristie Reed. Powell was initially convicted and sentenced to death, but the verdict was thrown out on appeal (he continued to serve three life sentences). However, Powell wrote a letter to Paul Ebert boasting about his crimes, believing that he could not be given the death penalty due to double jeopardy; however, he was indicted again for his crimes against Stacie Reed and sentenced the death penalty. Josh White, "Inmate's Letter Boasting of Crime Published," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2002.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2002/04/28/inmates-letter-boasting-of-crime-published/915eb2d3-cf1c-4e8b-b095-44753ae137e6/>

<sup>26</sup> Larry Bill Elliott was convicted and sentenced to death for the 2003 killing of Dana Thrall and Robert Finch in Woodbridge, VA. "Killer executed in Virginia electric chair," *Washington Times*, November 18, 2009. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/nov/18/killer-executed-in-virginia-electric-chair/>



car and have somebody kill him simply because he was doing his job.<sup>27</sup> And, uh, I, another case – I can't think – Mackerell, I think, he was coming from his probation office and decided to steal a car, and he shot the driver.<sup>28</sup> And a little girl, she was about 6 years old, witnessed it. Actually, she made a real good witness. She could trace where he went on the map, it was amazing. But uh, I had some friends that witnessed it too, that particular murder. Like the one, his name was Petey, the wife's name was Margaret, she said "Petey, I just saw somebody, I think I just saw somebody murdered." She looked out the window, over to the gas station where this happened...and he said, "Aww, c'mon Margaret, your imagination..." and turned out she did witness it. (Laughs)

**LM:** (Laughs) Huh. Who knew?

**PE:** There's a lot of funny things that happen in the most serious of cases. You know, a lot of cases that weren't murder cases, where people, people get their houses burglarized, they're scared to go into their houses again. The effect of what criminals do to law abiding people reaches pretty far.

**LM:** Did you ever have – because you dealt with a lot of dark things, um, and dark cases – did you ever have a problem compartmentalizing any of that? How did that affect your day to day life, you know, kind of dealing with the worst of the worst?

**PE:** Well, I don't guess it changed me much. It's just, you know, I try to do what I thought was right, that's all we can do. When I hired somebody, I always told them, you're going to make mistakes, I want you to do what's right in your judgment. If you don't know what's right come talk to me and I'll try to help you with it. But, that's the only reason, the only advice I gave most people how to handle their job. Some people got the reputation of being real tough, some people get the reputation of being real easy, but as long as they do what they think's right, and do whatever policy we have in the office. And I didn't have too many policies, because there's so much variation. But anyhow, I'm lucky I had such good people work for me.

**LM:** Yeah, what was the – you had a long career, over 52 years just as commonwealth's attorney, uh, what was the achievement that you were proudest of in your career?

**PE:** What was what?

(Lots of background noise, talking)

**LM:** What was the achievement, what was the biggest thing that happened to you that you're proudest of in your career?

**PE:** Huh. I don't know, I think that, I try to do what was right, no matter what. I made mistakes, like everybody makes mistakes. I lost my wife early on, in a lot of ways, but my family is real close,

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<sup>27</sup> Trooper Cavazos was shot and killed during a traffic stop on a I95 exit ramp in Dale City on February 24, 1993. Officer Down Memorial Page, *Trooper II Jose M. Cavazos*, <https://www.odmp.org/officer/459-trooper-ii-jose-m-cavazos>.

<sup>28</sup> Tony A. Mackall fatally shot Mary E. Dahn at a Woodbridge gas station where she and her husband worked in December 1986. Dahn's daughter April Dahn testified during Mackall's trial. Mackall was sentenced the death penalty. Pierre Thomas, "VA. Jury Sentences Gas Station Slayer to Electric Chair," *Washington Post*, October 24, 1987. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1987/10/24/va-jury-sentences-gas-station-slayer-to-electric-chair/99c07f7c-fc25-4c4d-a807-fa28ca88eabc/>

they usually call me every day. And um, in fact, my son, he was going to come up here, I told him I had an appointment. (Laughs) But, uh, I think, I feel fairly proud, I think most people believe I did what was the right thing to do, and I'm sure that some people don't think that way, but for the most part, I think most people respected me and what I did.

**LM:** And if, if you could retry one case, what case would that be?

**PE:** Well, thank, luckily I haven't had too many cases that I need to retry, but uh – the, uh - God, I'm getting terrible with names – the case where the police officers were shot? Of course, he was convicted, again, life in the penitentiary, but the jury hung on that case, right down the middle. And, I would retry that, uh, because, we thought – well, I wasn't, my health was starting deteriorate then, so I didn't get a chance to work too much on it, but a lot – and, I think we could take a little different tact on it. But, that's the way the cookie crumbles.<sup>29</sup>

**LM:** Mmm hm. That was fairly recent then?

**PE:** What's that?

(1:04:35)

**LM:** That was pretty recent? That case?

**PE:** Yeah, that was the last big, you know, big case I had. And I got, there's one out in Shenandoah County still getting letters, from – he was found, he got the death penalty, but the doctors all said he was impaired, mentally, and that was before, if that's the case, you can't execute them, if he's not mentally stable, I guess that's the best way to put it. But anyhow, that was a case up in Shenandoah that I really didn't agree that he was incompetent.<sup>30</sup>

**LM:** Mm hm. Well, this is going to lighten things up a little bit, but, uh, I heard that you used to hold a pretty famous annual holiday party at the, an annual Christmas party at the Manassas Rescue Squad?

**PE:** Yeah.

**LM:** Uh, and that everybody used to come, do you have any good stories from that party?

**PE:** Aww, yeah, to start off, you know, the commonwealth's attorney was a part-time job, but we always, and my office was, still there on Peabody Street, and I still have an office there, just don't

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<sup>29</sup> On February 27, 2016, Officer Ashley Guindon was working her first shift as a Prince William County police officer and was shot and killed by Ronald Hamilton, who also killed his wife Crystal Hamilton during a domestic dispute. He received life in prison. Ian Shapira, "He's sent more killers to death row than any Va. Prosecutor. But not this time" *Washington Post*, November 5, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/hes-sent-more-killers-to-death-row-than-any-va-prosecutor-but-not-this-time/2018/11/03/7873fbbe-dd32-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/hes-sent-more-killers-to-death-row-than-any-va-prosecutor-but-not-this-time/2018/11/03/7873fbbe-dd32-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html)

<sup>30</sup> "Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe commuted the sentence of mentally incompetent death-row prisoner William Joseph Burns on December 29, 2017, after multiple mental-health experts said Burns was unlikely to regain sufficient competency for his death sentence to ever be carried out." "Virginia Governor Commutes Death Sentence of Mentally Incompetent Death-Row Prisoner," *Death Penalty Information Center*, January 3, 2018. <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/news/virginia-governor-commutes-death-sentence-of-mentally-incompetent-death-row-prisoner>

ever get there. And we would have a Christmas party, people would come up and down the stairs. And then when the courthouse was built, we had one or two, I think, and everybody liked to have an alcoholic drink, and Judge Selwyn Smith didn't want people drinking in the courthouse, except they did serve wine when they dedicated it – (laughs)

**LM:** (Laughs)

**PE:** I pointed that out to him. But, anyhow, uh, so I started renting the rescue squad. And uh, I fished and hunted a lot, we'd have a lot of wild game, and people would bring that stuff, uh, ---, elk or moose or some ---. And people, it's funny, people were going to try a bear, just to say I ate some bear, I guess. But, we had a lot of people too – about 900 people would come to this thing, coming and going.

**LM:** 900?

**PE:** Yeah.

**LM:** Oh wow. That's a lot (laughing).

**PE:** That's a lot, yeah.

**LM:** I had no idea. Okay.

**PE:** And it was expensive.

**LM:** I bet, and you hosted it every year?

**PE:** Yeah, I paid for it.

**LM:** Wow.

**PE:** But, I had a lot of help, people cooking and what have you. And I guess with the way food's going up, I'd be broke.

(1:08:10)

**LM:** (Laughs) Umm, so, the law – law library, excuse me, in the courthouse, that was recently named for you?

**PE:** Yeah, that was a real honor, I thought, I felt very nice, and it was nice of them to do that. I don't know why, but, I never been in the law library. I used to, in law school, I did a lot of work in Fairfax Courthouse, and I'd take, if I got a break, I'd go upstairs, in the law library, much smaller than what you've got in Prince William, and study up there. But, uh, books, in order to --- the books now, it's all electronic, and you, I guess there will come a time the book as we know it is not much use. But, old timer like me, I gotta read the book. If I can get it on the phone it doesn't seem the same.

**LM:** It doesn't, I agree. (Laughs) I'm the same way.

**PE:** (Laughs) Well I read a lot. Mostly novels.

**LM:** Really?

**PE:** Yeah.

**LM:** What, uh, who's your favorite author?

**PE:** I don't have one.

**LM:** No? Okay.

**PE:** I like Grisham stuff pretty good. His is legally correct. A lot of these lawyer, crime things, they're not legally correct. In fact, I haven't seen if he has anything out lately. I usually go by the Barnes & Noble to see what was cooking, but I haven't done that lately.

**LM:** Hmm. Oh, and I meant to ask, so the law library was named after you, and I guess the former law library was in a trailer behind your, uh, old office, is that correct?

**PE:** It might have been.

**LM:** Okay. But you didn't go?

**PE:** No, yeah, the...yeah, I guess it was. Yeah, I got to a point in practicing, I didn't do much research. I used to do a lot of research. And uh, but I'd work on this issue, and these kids come out of law school a whole lot smarter than I am. (Laughs)

**LM:** And they do the research? (Laugh) Uh, you talked about it a lot, umm, about how you're an avid hunter and fisherman, so I know every fisherman has a good story. What's your best fishing story?

**PE:** Fishing story?

**LM:** Yeah.

**PE:** Oh wow. I have a lot of those.

**LM:** Yeah. What's your best one?

**PE:** Oh God.

**LM:** (Laughs)

**PE:** Well, what I do is I start, I like to fish what we call rockfish, or striped bay. And lower Potomac River, and I have a cottage over there on the lower Potomac River, that's a good area for them when they school. And right now, when the weather's warm they spread out. And umm, so I fish there and the fish would come down from --- and come into the Chesapeake Bay in the fall. And then, off Virginia Beach, so I fish there. In the summertime, I go up to Wachapreague on the eastern shore and fish out of there, uh, and that was a lot of fun. But, I ran aground twice over there in that snaky channel they had, and the locals named it "Paul's Point," cause I said hit the damn point twice, I had to get pulled off. And, uh, I don't know, there's so many things -- I had a lot of fun fishing. One case, one instance, Richard Johnson used to be Superintendent of the schools here at one time,<sup>31</sup> he was on the boat with a buddy, and I had full fishing rod my parents had given me, it was a green

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Johnson was the Superintendent of Prince William County Schools from 1980-1986. John F. Harris, "Prince William School Board Fires Superintendent Johnson," *Washington Post*, December 4, 1986.

rod. A fish hit it, jerked it out, knocked it out of Joe's hands, it went overboard. And I said, "Oh my God, we gotta say goodbye to Ol' Green and toast it." So everybody had a drink in honor of, to say goodbye to Ol' Green. About a half hour later, Joe was pulling in a fish he killed on a line, he got Ol' Green back and it still had the fish on the line.

**LM:** (Laughs)

**PE:** Everybody joked about that for a long time. And that was, and then I was in a tournament down in Morehead City, North Carolina. And, we were, had the biggest fish – and there's a lot, in those tournaments you get a lot of money involved in them, it's a gamble, everybody puts money in the pot and they divide it, depending on how big the fish is. But anyhow, we caught a big – well, I did --- on it, and uh, we were leading the thing in the third day, I turned out a big chunk of money. Somebody offered me money to take ----, we didn't win. The last day we got beat. But I did get invited to go to, *Motorboat Magazine* had a fishing contest down in the Keys, and the people who won it, couldn't go, didn't want to go, so they got me. And, that was big fun. They came out with a big article. And at that time that's a national magazine. And I've still got a copy of that, I think.

**LM:** Hmm. And what magazine was that?

**PE:** What's that?

**LM:** What magazine was that?

**PE:** It's called *Motorboat Magazine*, they went out of business, uh, but it was well-read in the boating circle.

(1:15:55)

**LM:** Well, we've been talking for a while so this is my last question, and it's pretty broad, we've talked about it a little bit, but I guess talking a little bit, umm, the biggest ways you've seen Prince William County change over the years? If there was a tipping point that you noticed, and uh, just your observations, and...

**PE:** Well, when I came here this County was primarily rural, and had about 50,000 people at the most, the county and the cities combined. And I think it was, probably 12 to 20 dairy farms here, and that slowly they're disappearing. And there may be one left, but I'm not sure, and development has swamped here and traffic is terrible, I don't have to tell you, but it's hard to keep up with that. But there's a great demand for housing in this area, and people want to come here because they get work, primarily, but it is a vast change for people who have lived here for long periods of time. And the crime rate was very low, and the old jail, the old jail probably held, at the most, maybe 50 people? If you double bunked, or what have you. Different atmosphere as to what ----. I know I tell a lot of stories, I came home one night, my wife's, she was in bed, she woke up and said, "Sheriff's office called, they said they've got a disruption over at the jail." So I went over there, put my clothes back on, went over there, and when I got there a guy named --- Meade, and he was, he was, had a whole armful of Coke bottles, there was a Coke machine in the Sheriff's office. And he would throw

those things, and they would hit the wall and explode, and so I – he'd already hit Frank McGuinn,<sup>32</sup> who was on the police department, and I think, he may have been state police at that time...whatever it was, he was all bent over – he had hit Frank...and then, so I thought I'd tease him make him throw the bottles at me until he dropped – until he ran out of bottles, -- little bitty fellow, but strong as a bull, he was a window glazier by trade. And, uh, so they, but he, he'd unload one bottle go get another one full, there was probably ten cases and I said I don't think we, I could stand that. And so anyhow, all of a sudden he disappeared. And somebody answered the phone, the phone was ringing and the woman who lived down the street from me, which was not too far from the courthouse – Dottie Lou Ellens, she was on the phone and said I've got a man here has been beaten, he's bleeding – and Nays (?), McGuinn had hit him over the head with a gun in the course of their fight. And so, another --- named Craig, he – I said, I'll bring an officer over there, and she said no, she thought he was the victim. So anyhow, we went into her house, and Nays - he was in there, she had put a towel on his head, and they handcuffed me to him, but I had a --- coat on, he --- uniform.... So anyhow, I finally got him, took him to the hospital first, and they put him to sleep, took the shackles off of me, but I wasn't so sure I wouldn't be spending the night in the jail, or hospital. That was just, one of the funny stories. Yeah...

**LM:** That's a good one.

**PE:** Yeah, it's crazy.

**LM:** Yeah, so, is there anything I've missed? Or we've missed?

**PE:** I don't think so, there a lot - I could sit for hours and tell you ---

(overtalk)

**LM:** I know people would like to hear it.

**PE:** I don't think, uh, I really haven't given you much to go on, but there have certainly been a vast change. You know, we've had, I think, pretty good government, uh, in the county, ummm...when I first went on the Board, went into office and was council to the Board, we had very qualified people, I thought. Mr. Manderfield was a banker, Fitzwater had a car dealership, Alvey had a store, Joe Johnson was a big farmer, Dr. Ferlazzo was a doctor, uh...I think that might be it.<sup>33</sup> But, anyhow, they had a business background, and over the years it's changed so that people are not necessarily in business, are used to operating, big functioning organizations, and that's why they have to hire people that are qualified ....sometimes a question whether or not they use their judgment, but that's typical.

(1:23:23)

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<sup>32</sup> Frank McGuinn was in the Virginia State Police from 1963-1970 and was an inaugural member of the Prince William County Police Department, serving from 1970-1982.

<https://www.facebook.com/PWCPolice/photos/a.116046165111492/5321306261252097/?type=3>

<sup>33</sup> Ebert lists five of the six 1964-1968 Board of Supervisors: Grover P. Manderfield (Occoquan), O.J. Fitzwater (chairman, Brentsville), Robert Alvey (Gainesville), Joseph Johnson (Manassas), and Alfred Ferlazzo (Dumfries). The sixth was Bradford Lowe (Coles). Andrew J. Donnelly, "1964-68 Board of Supervisors," *Historic Prince William Newsletter*, June 2004. <https://historicprincewilliam.org/county-history/stories/board-of-supervisors-64-68.html>

**LM:** Mmm hmm. Well yeah, I think you answered that, I think the further landscape was how the legal landscape has changed –

**PE:** What's that?

**LM:** How the legal landscape has changed? How things have changed, how things are –

**PE:** How...?

**LM:** The legal landscape? So...I guess how the law has changed in Prince William County over the years.

**PE:** Well my office, when I was there, it was like any other office, it had a personnel problem, --- and when I first went there, it was three or four of us. I think Bill Murphy,<sup>34</sup> and Bill Stephens,<sup>35</sup> who's still around. And uh, Ed Fox – Ed Fox<sup>36</sup> died in my office, he just, he had a heart problem. I had a couch in my office, and he went in there, laid down and died.

**LM:** Oh no.

(around 1:24)

**PE:** But anyhow, that was all part time. And, what changed, what's changed about it - and we – the judges – would ride the circuit, so to speak, in the circuit court. And we wouldn't have circuit court but maybe once a week, sometimes twice, and if they had a jury that was the big thing. And then they, the old courthouse wasn't big enough to handle it at the location where it was, so they built what we called a "ten (?) court" across the street from my office, Peabody, there now where I think all the law enforcement keeps their stuff, storage. That's well before the courthouse was built. And, lot more and more courts, more and more caseload...there's more people. And that's what causes a lot of problems. This rapid growth is hard to handle.

**LM:** Mm hm.

**PE:** From anything to prosecutors office to anything else. I'll never forget, old Judge Paul Brown died while he was working,<sup>37</sup> but he, the *Washington Post* interviewed him, uh, a week or two before his death, and they asked him the question, "What would you change?" And he said, "Well, the law has changed...the Commonwealth has changed and the law has changed. And I don't like it much. But ask any old man and he'll tell you the same thing." And I'll say this holds true today.

**LM:** You feel the same way? (Laughs)

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<sup>34</sup> Bill Murphy; see Footnote 1.

<sup>35</sup> "He started on January 1, 1968 and along with William Murphy (later General District Court Judge) and Ed Fox, Bill was sworn in as one of the first three Assistant Commonwealth Attorneys to Mr. Ebert." "Just Don't Put Anybody in Jail Until Monday," Based on an interview of Bill Stephens by John D. Whittington in October 2014. Prince William County Bar Association. [https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews\\_14\\_2688751442.pdf](https://www.pwcba.org/About/historical-interviews_14_2688751442.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> "Judge Brown, who had sat on the bench of the 16<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit (Alexandria and Fairfax and Prince William Counties) since 1944, was the dominant surviving link between the rural past and urban present of Virginia's largest county. Hank Burchard, "Judge Paul E. Brown Dead at 62," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, November 5, 1966. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/142906915>

**PE:** Yeah, and I don't guess, in my case the method of law enforcement, or what's happening to law enforcement or the prosecution is concerning. We always work real closely with the police department, federal agency and everybody, the FBI had an office right across from the courthouse. But that's changed now. And I think when the small papers went out of business, it, people didn't really know what's happening like they used to know it. Papers hold people accountable, much more so than television or the news today. And, we've had some good reporters, I think, over the years, in particular at the *Washington Post*. To start off, I was scared of the position that the big city papers would take to a country boy, but it changed. And a lot of people became pretty good friends. Pierre Thomas,<sup>38</sup> he's still on television, he was a reporter, and I always had a lot of interaction with, uh, the guy that – he just retired from Channel 4. Pat, uh...<sup>39</sup>

**LM:** Well...

**PE:** Yeah, uh.

**LM:** I know who you're talking about, yeah.

**PE:** And Julie Carey, she's still plugging.<sup>40</sup> But big change, and turnover in people in those stations, too. But anyhow, the Commanders won last night so everybody's happy.

**LM:** (Laughs) There you go. Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Ebert. I'm going to -

**PE:** Well sure, nice to meet you, and if you think of anything you want to ask me, just call me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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<sup>38</sup> Pierre Thomas worked for over a decade at the *Washington Post* before transitioning to a career in television news. "ABC News correspondent Pierre Thomas to deliver 2004 Virginia Tech commencement address," *Virginia Tech News*, February 17, 2004. <https://news.vt.edu/articles/2004/02/2004-189.html>

<sup>39</sup> Ebert is referencing Pat Collins, who retired in 2022. Maggie More, "NBC4 Washington Legend Pat Collins Is Retiring. Here Are Some of His Most Memorable Moments," *NBC Washington*, December 21, 2022. <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/nbc4-washington-legend-pat-collins-is-retiring-here-are-some-of-his-most-memorable-moments/3227860/>

<sup>40</sup> As of 2023, Julie Carey is the Northern Virginia Bureau Chief for News4. <https://www.nbcwashington.com/author/julie-carey/>