

THE MELANIE ILENE RIEGER  
Memorial Conference Against Violence



January 17, 2007

Opposition to Senate Bill No. 126 & House Bill No. 5258

Sponsored by:  
*Survivors of Homicide Inc.*

Co-sponsored by:  
*CT Department of Correction  
CT Board of Parole  
CT Department of Probation  
CT Division of Criminal Justice  
Office of the Chief State's Atty.  
CT Office of the Victim Advocate  
CT Office of Victim Services  
The Village of Families  
and Children*

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Judiciary Committee: I would, however, like to give you a homicide survivor's perspective on your discussion to expand media coverage(e.g. cameras in the courtroom). My beautiful 19 year-old daughter Melanie was brutally murdered on May 24, 1994. My wife Wanda and I were totally traumatized. We were further victimized by having to sit through a trial 2 years later. Our trials and tribulations continue on a daily basis, especially with the ridiculous appeals that are heard, in our case, about every two years. I served as President of Survivors of Homicide for 6 years and currently serve as President of the Melanie Ilene Rieger Memorial Foundation. At the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Melanie Ilene Rieger Memorial Conference Against Violence held this past April, Wanda and I were presented a special award for our dedication and service to crime victims by the Office of the Victim Advocate, Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence( CCADV), Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Service( CONNSACS), Mothers Against Drunk Driving( MADD) and Survivors of Homicide(SOH).

It is very intimidating for crime victims and survivors to have to sit through a criminal trial. Many of us have never even set foot in a courtroom. Having to cope with the violent loss of a loved one; the loss of an innocent child to violence is the ultimate tragedy, is an unbelievably difficult task. Then, to have to sit through the many unpleasant, deceitful, untruthful events that often characterize a murder trial, is virtually impossible. It is very difficult to control one's emotions when such things as autopsy pictures are shown or the defense attorney presents dubious witnesses who will say anything to save themselves or make large fees for their testimony.

Why should these emotions be presented to the general public? More scary would be the presentation of video to the many quasi news programs which pervade the media. For hours at a time, they digest, spit out, regurgitate meaningless facts to retain an audience. Victims' lives are dissected into minute sections with no apparent rational purpose. Why should we, crime victims and homicide survivors, have to endure further victimization? Media can be very helpful in getting to the truth. It would be valid to present to the public the workings of the Connecticut Criminal Justice System but, not at the expense of crime victims. Every year, at the Annual Melanie Ilene Rieger Memorial Conference Against Violence, we present a criminal justice panel which discusses various aspects of the criminal justice system. The panel features

representatives from the Office of the Chief State's Attorney, CT Division of Public Defender Services, CT Department of Correction, CT Office of the Victim Advocate, CT Judicial Branch: representatives from the Superior Court and The Office of Victim Services, and many others. Perhaps your desire to educate the public on the CT Judicial System can be presented at the next Melanie Rieger Conference in April.

I was President of Survivors of Homicide when we were able to enact several pieces of meaningful legislation. Firstly, the prosecutor was given the right to display a picture of the homicide victim on his/her desk during opening and closing arguments. The purpose of this was to show the jury that the victim was once a viable, living, breathing human being and not characterized by the horrific autopsy photos shown during the trial. Many prosecutors, even today, are hesitant to make use of this law as they are afraid of appeal. So, we cannot have a plain picture of the victim in the courtroom but we may have the media showing victims' families with their souls and guts laid out in the courtroom. Something is wrong with this!

Secondly, victims' or their survivors must be consulted before a plea bargain is put forth and must sign that they were informed and what their opinion was. This wording allows a plea bargain to be enacted, anyway, over the wishes of victims' or survivors. I am concerned about possible similar wording with respect to allowing cameras in the courtroom. Again, wording to the affect that crime victims or survivors must be notified regarding their right to object to such coverage and have the right to be heard in this matter, basically presents the same lack of protection as the plea bargain legislation.

I would strongly object to the presence of cameras and other recording devices in the courtroom during any trial regarding a violent crime. May I remind you of the OJ Simpson case. Live broadcasts certainly showed the California Criminal Justice System in very bad light. Crime victims have attained some rights within the legal system in the past 10 years. Our state and national constitutions contain the rights of victims to be treated with dignity and respect and to be protected from the accused throughout court proceedings. When we helped phrase the amendments and campaigned hard for their passage, we never thought that we would have to add the statement that "crime victims be protected from the media in the courtroom as well".

Thank you for reading my comments. Please feel free to contact me should you desire further commentary.

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Samuel L. Rieger', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Samuel L. Rieger, Ph.D.  
The Melanie Ilene Rieger Memorial Foundation