

Today's Flick Fact

Question: At last count, there were 719 life insurance companies in America alone. Can you name the one that has earned the No. 1 spot on Forbes' list of the world's best life insurance companies?

Answer: You don't have to go too far in life to find it. Bloomington-based Country Financial has earned the top spot for 2024, as Forbes, the legendary American business magazine, partnered with market research firm Statista to survey more than 45,000 consumers in 15 countries. Country, says Forbes, has personalized more of its life insurance offerings and doubled down on customer service to move up to No. 1 in the world. (Thanks to Paul Harmon for the tip.)



HOW TIME FLIES

100 years ago

March 27, 1925: One hundred representatives of the various financial institutions of the county assembled yesterday afternoon at the Bloomington club, all appearing to be animated by the same desire toward organization to reduce the chances of success of the thugs and yeggs who at any hour of the day or night may seek to plunder and murder. The bankers appear to be determined to organize against the bandit and hold-up man now terrorizing the middle west.

ton-Normal Home Builders' Association heard a prediction for a good year, both in real estate and availability of home mortgages, from Craig Hart, president of Bloomington Federal Savings and Loan Association. Although builders are confronted with a recession, the price spiral in building materials has eased somewhat, he said. He indicated that the days of 6% interest rates on mortgages that existed in the 1960s were gone forever.

25 years ago

75 years ago

March 27, 1950: "Wanted — a system of establishing corn acreage allotments fair to all farmers." That wish has been expressed here by many farmers, and also by Orville A. Leischner, chairman of the Champaign County PMA committee. But he frankly admits he doesn't have the answer.

March 27, 2000: Alexander Spiridonov, a foreign exchange student from Vladimir, Russia, studying at Normal Community High School, has won first place and \$200 in an annual World Affairs Conference essay contest. The NCHS senior wrote about the advantages of improved Cuban-American relations. "I did my best to use the opportunity given to me by being a straight-A student, as well as a member of American life and society," he writes in his resume.

50 years ago

March 27, 1975: Members of the Bloomington-Normal Home Builders' Association heard a prediction for a good year, both in real estate and availability of home mortgages, from Craig Hart, president of Bloomington Federal Savings and Loan Association. Although builders are confronted with a recession, the price spiral in building materials has eased somewhat, he said. He indicated that the days of 6% interest rates on mortgages that existed in the 1960s were gone forever.

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Appellate court hears arguments in McNeil, Snow exoneration cases

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NORMAL — Two Bloomington-Normal men, both convicted of murder in two unrelated McLean County cases, are arguing innocence in appellate court.

A panel of justices in the 4th District Appellate Court heard oral arguments Tuesday morning in the Bone Student Center at Illinois State University, co-hosted by the school's Department of Politics and Government and the McLean County Bar Association.

Karl Leonard Loevy, attorneys with The Exoneration Project, argued for Bart McNeil and Jamie Snow, who were convicted in the 1990s and have long maintained their innocence. Justice Amy Lannerd presided over McNeil's case and Justice Robert Steigmann presided in Snow's case, both accompanied by Justices James Knecht and Peter Cavanagh.

DNA on McNeil's sheets

McNeil, 65, was convicted in 1999 in the suffocation death of his 3-year-old daughter, Christina, and sentenced to 100 years in prison.

He has alleged his ex-girlfriend, Misook Nowlin, killed his daughter. Nowlin serving 55 years in prison, convicted of killing her mother-in-law, Linda Tyda, in 2011. She has also sought a new trial for her conviction, but McLean County Judge Scott Kording denied her motion in August 2023.

McLean County Judge William Yoder denied McNeil a new trial in February 2024 following a third-stage post-conviction hearing.

On Tuesday, Leonard told the panel of justices "powerful evidence" points to Nowlin as an alternate suspect in the 3-year-old's death, citing the woman's DNA that was recovered at the scene.

Her hair was found on the bed in McNeil's apartment where Christina died, the attorney said.

When Nowlin was questioned about the girl's death, she asserted her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and declined to answer under oath, which Leonard argued was indicative of her guilt.

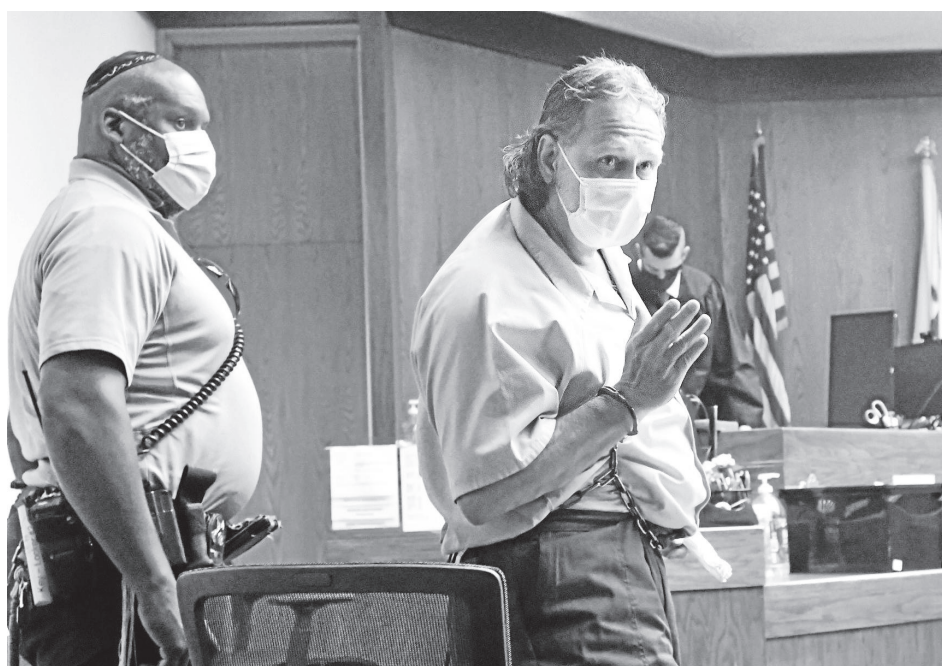
"There's evidence she told a friend if McNeil had not broken up with her, Christina wouldn't have died. And, of course, there's evidence she had confessed," Leonard said during Tuesday's hearing.

During McNeil's most McLean County post-conviction hearings, his attorneys argued Nowlin had confessed to killing Christina by telling two relatives. Yoder ruled the testimonies regarding Nowlin's alleged confessions would "almost certainly not be admissible" in a new trial.

Leonard said Nowlin had a history of prior domestic violence incidents, as well as allegations of threats made to suffocate her own daughter.

He also argued Nowlin killed her mother-in-law by strangulation, "by the same means, with the same motive."

"The facts wouldn't be any more dissimilar," said Adam Rodriguez, appellate prosecutor in this case. "It's



DAVID PROEBER PHOTOS, THE PANTAGRAPH

Schuyler County Circuit Judge Ramon M. Escapa ordered 8,000 documents collected by Bloomington police and Illinois State Police investigators be turned over to Snow's legal counsel.



The duplex at 1106 N. Evans Street in Bloomington where Bart McNeil was accused in the 1998 murder of his daughter, Christina, is no longer standing.

not relevant in this case."

The prosecutor argued Tyda's death was premeditated, but Christina's was not.

McNeil's exoneration attorney argued the Circuit Court erred in the second and third post-conviction stages by not allowing the DNA evidence to be admitted based on the probability that Nowlin had stayed at the residence prior to the girl's death.

Rodriguez also argued this evidence was not enough.

"DNA doesn't provide a time stamp," he said.

Justice Knecht noted Nowlin had slept at McNeil's apartment seven days prior to Christina's death, and Nowlin and McNeil had shared a previous apartment, which had the same bed.

However, Leonard said there was evidence the sheets had been laundered the day of the murder, with a receipt to prove this claim, meaning Nowlin's existing DNA would have been destroyed prior to the murder.

In his argument, Rodriguez said the crime scene showed no evidence of a third party in the apartment at the time of the murder.

The prosecutor noted McNeil had told police his door was locked, meaning an intruder would only have been able to come in through a window. The state's position was this would be "impossible" considering there were no footprints near the window on the rainy night of the murder or evidence of the window having been disturbed with dust on the pane, and spider webs around the window.

Leonard stood by the defense's position that Nowlin entered the residence through the window, citing a biology expert who said the spider webbing looked as if a spider had re-webbed near the window.

The justices asked Leonard if Nowlin could have invoked the Fifth Amendment for a reason other than guilt, such as a pending post-conviction matter in a separate case.

"Instead of doing the one thing that would've helped her case, she didn't. Because testifying truthfully would have involved admitting to murdering a 3-year-old," Leonard said.

Rodriguez said the claims have been assessed and ultimately found to be without merit.

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Fingerprints, DNA in Snow's case

Snow, 59, was sentenced to life in prison in 2001 after he was convicted of fatally shooting 18-year-old gas station attendant William Little a decade earlier. He is appealing the trial court's denial of his request to introduce new evidence through DNA testing and fingerprint analysis.

"Technology has improved and databases have changed," said Loevy, arguing for the justices to allow the evidence to be tested.

She said this evidence, which includes 21 fingerprints found at the crime scene on the door handle, cash register and counter, could prove Snow's innocence.

Loevy said out of those 21, only one fingerprint was taken in 1991.

She also argued there was evidence of a struggle between attacker and Little, resulting in bruising on the gas station clerk's forearm and head.

Previous courts had ruled there was no evidence of a struggle, therefore Loevy argued they had erred in those decisions.

Loevy said the courts' rulings were "ignoring abundant evidence."

In addition to the 21 fingerprints, Loevy said new advances in technology could allow for the blood pool near the victim to be tested for multiple sources of DNA, separating Little's from an attacker's DNA.

Loevy further argued the attacker's DNA could be found on the Little's clothes because of the evidence indicating a struggle.

She noted Snow was only connected to the death by a lineup more than eight years after the crime was committed, and no other evidence connected him to Little's death. Additionally, Loevy said police had other suspects, who could be cross-examined with DNA and fingerprint evidence, if tested.

The defense "doesn't have to prove (Snow's) innocence, just advance his claim," the defense attorney said.

Prosecutor Allison Paige Brooks argued the defense's argument was "speaking about possibilities, which are speculative."

Brooks said, in a previous request for a new trial, the DNA and fingerprint evidence were denied for the same reason: the crime happened at a public gas station.

"There's no way to determine the time the fingerprints were deposited," Brooks said.

She added that defendants cannot enter an alternate suspect of a crime unless it is definitive.

Brooks argued, when a previous court ruled on this issue, the court denied Snow's appeal because of the speculative nature of these claims and there was no possibility to prove if the DNA came from a struggle.

The prosecutor also said Snow had made statements about this crime to a "large number" of people, including officers. Brooks said Snow had admitted to the crime, though she was unable to state to whom when asked by the justices. She said the admissions were made to Snow's friends or acquaintances.

Since these admissions, The Exoneration Project has been working to attain retractions from witnesses, Brooks said.

'Absolutely innocent'

Chris Ross, McNeil's cousin who has been a public voice for his exoneration case, spoke with media after the hearings Tuesday.

"Who's to say this wasn't premeditated?" Ross said in response to the prosecutor's arguments related to Christina's death.

Ross said he's been following the case for 14 years and was thankful it was heard in the appellate court before a room of around 100 observers.

He said he believes it is "obvious" Nowlin is guilty of killing Christina McNeil from the evidence presented Tuesday.

If McNeil had been present for the hearing, Ross said he would have been thankful for the supporters, family members and his legal team, which includes both the Illinois Innocence Project and The Exoneration Project.

Ross noted "very pointed questions," asked by the justices, and he applauded Leonard's arguments.

He said he is hoping either for a new trial or a reversal of McNeil's conviction all together, and he wants McLean County to pursue Nowlin as a suspect in Christina's murder.

Additionally, Ross noted, in a 2005 appeal, McNeil's attorneys did not get a chance to present DNA and credit card evidence to prove the sheets were freshly laundered.

Ross said during McNeil's initial trial, the presiding judge had told McNeil that if biological evidence were presented, his innocence assertion may have held up.

"This is a wrongful conviction case. Bart is absolutely innocent," Ross said.

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