



School of Law  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



GEORGIA  
CRIMINAL LAW  
SYMPOSIUM

THE SECOND ANNUAL

# GEORGIA CRIMINAL LAW SYMPOSIUM

*Confronting Contemporary  
Criminal Justice in Georgia:  
A Dialogue Addressing  
Conviction Integrity,  
Domestic Violence, and the  
Death Penalty*



*The University of Georgia School of Law  
proudly presents:*

THE SECOND ANNUAL GEORGIA  
CRIMINAL LAW SYMPOSIUM

CONFRONTING  
CONTEMPORARY  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN  
GEORGIA:

A DIALOGUE ADDRESSING CONVICTION  
INTEGRITY, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE  
DEATH PENALTY

*Friday, February 17, 2023  
University of Georgia School of  
Law Dean Rusk Hall*



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CRIMINAL LAW  
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# EVENT OVERVIEW

We are honored to present to you the Second Annual Georgia Criminal Law Symposium, *Confronting Contemporary Criminal Justice in Georgia: A Dialogue Addressing Conviction Integrity, Domestic Violence and the Death Penalty*. This Symposium will examine the complex issues surrounding domestic violence, death penalty sentencing and conviction integrity efforts in the state. The event will be composed of a presentation by the Carl Vinson Institute and three panels: Mitigating Life and Death Sentencing, Conviction Integrity and the Infallibility of Georgia's Legal System, and the Criminal Justice Responses to Domestic Violence. The diverse lineup of esteemed panelists, which includes district attorneys, defense attorneys, academics, community activists, and others, will provide both a practical and theoretical insight about the state of criminal justice in Georgia surrounding these important practice areas and the changes that should be made in the future. Whether you are a lawyer, academic, student, or interested member of the public, we hope that you find this event informative, engaging, and inspiring.

# SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

**8:00 – 9:00 AM**

**Light Breakfast (optional)**

**Registration**

**9:00 – 9:15 AM**

**Introductory Remarks**

**Andrea L. Dennis**

*Associate Dean & John Byrd Martin  
Chair of Law, University of Georgia  
School of Law*

**Zohra Ahmed**

*Assistant Professor of Law, University  
of Georgia School of Law*

**9:15 – 10:15 AM**

**Opening Presentation, Carl Vinson**

**Institute of Government**

**Holly Lynde**

*Fiscal Analyst, Carl Vinson Institute of  
Government*

**Dr. Sarah Shannon**

*Associate Professor of Sociology, University of  
Georgia*

**10:15 – 10:30 AM**

**Break**

**10:30 – 11:45 AM**

**Panel 1: Mitigating Life and Death**

**Sentencing**

**T. Wright Barksdale**

*District Attorney,  
Ocmulgee Judicial Circuit*

**S. Jill Benton**

*Federal Defender Program  
Supervisor, Capital Habeas Unit,  
Northern District of Georgia*

**Ryan Swingle**

*Criminal Defense Attorney,  
Adjunct Professor, University of  
Georgia School of Law, Former  
Georgia Capital Defender*

**Ruth Vann**

*Criminal Defense  
Investigator/Mitigator, Georgia  
Public Defender Council Capital  
Unit*

*Moderator: **Andrea L. Dennis**  
Associate Dean & John Byrd Martin  
Chair of Law, University of Georgia  
School of Law*

**11:45 AM – 1:00 PM** **Lunch (Provided with  
Registration)**

**1:00 PM – 2:15 PM** **Panel 2: Criminal Justice Responses to  
Domestic Violence**

**Joanna Helsby**

*Deputy Chief Assistant District  
Attorney, Domestic Violence and  
Sexual Assault Unit, Stone  
Mountain Judicial Circuit*

**Joel Correa**

*Co-Director, Atlanta Volunteer  
Lawyers Foundation's (AVLF) Safe  
and Stable Families Project*

**Jennifer Thomas**

*Director of Strategic  
Partnerships, Criminal Justice  
Coordinating Counsel (CJCC)*

**Benjamin Pearlman**

*Deputy Chief Assistant Public Defender,  
Western Judicial Circuit*

**2:15 – 2:30 PM**

**Break**

**2:30 – 3:45 PM**

**Panel 3: Conviction Integrity and the  
Infallibility of Georgia’s Legal System**

**Leigh Schrope, Esq.**

*Partner, Shein, Brandenburg & Schrope*

**Aimee Maxwell, Esq.**

*Chief Senior Assistant District  
Attorney - Conviction Integrity Unit,  
Fulton County District Attorney’s  
Office*

**Mario Stinchcomb**

*Exoneree*

**Moderator: Melissa Redmon**

*Clinical Assistant Professor & Prosecutorial  
Justice Program Director, University of*



Georgia School of Law

**3:45 PM - 4:30 PM**      **Reception at Rusk Atrium**



# PANEL DESCRIPTIONS

## **Panel 1: Mitigating Life and Death Sentencing**

*Currently, Georgia is one of the twenty-four states that still allow capital punishment. Since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976, 76 people were executed in Georgia alone. While the nation is very clearly divided on whether or not capital punishment should be outlawed, capital punishment is here today in Georgia. When an offense is capital punishment eligible, mitigating factors are often the difference between life and death, literally. This panel seeks to explore mitigation in both capital punishment cases, as well as life sentencing cases. The panel will draw from the unique perspectives of a prosecutor who has tried capital offense cases, defense attorneys, and a mitigator.*

## **Panel 2: Criminal Justice Responses to Domestic Violence**

*Following the COVID-19 pandemic, incidents of domestic violence in Georgia have been continuously rising. Historically, partner abuse has been viewed as a normal part of marriage or intimate relationships. It was not until the end of the 1970's that domestic violence was recognized as a violation of the law. Since that time, the criminal justice system has responded to domestic violence as a criminal offense in order to protect*

*those who are victims or survivors and justify government intervention into intimate partner relationships. Recently, Georgia has attempted to reduce domestic violence incidents with increased sentences, specialized law enforcement and prosecution units, and intervention programs. In the midst of a critical time, this panel addresses whether or not the criminal justice system's current approach will be successful, the effects of current policies, and different avenues for preventing domestic violence.*

## **Panel 3: Conviction Integrity Units and the Fallibility of Georgia's Legal System**

*Mario Stinchcomb was convicted of malice murder and aggravated assault in 2002. Stinchcomb was sentenced to life in prison without parole, and his conviction was upheld on appeal. Almost twenty years later, Leigh Schrope, of the law firm of Shein, Brandenburg & Schrope, filed an Extraordinary Motion for New Trial based on newly discovered evidence, which was denied in June 2019. A month later, Leigh Schrope filed an appeal with the Georgia Supreme Court, which ordered an evidentiary hearing based on the new evidence. Based on the evidence found, Aimee Maxwell of the Fulton County District Attorney's Office Conviction Integrity Unit reinvestigated the case and found that the newly found evidence exonerated Mario Stinchcomb. In 2021, the Conviction Integrity Unit, in conjunction with Shein, Brandenburg & Schrope, filed a joint motion for a new trial and days later, Mario Stinchcomb was released from prison a free man.*

*Of the one hundred fifty-nine counties in Georgia, only two counties have Conviction Integrity Units - Fulton County and Gwinnett County. Mario Stinchcomb was the first person exonerated by the Fulton County District Attorney's Office. Mr. Stinchcomb's case highlights the fallibility of Georgia's legal system and the need for improvement in cases of actual innocence. This panel will discuss Mario Stinchcomb's case and the relationship between the State, criminal defendants and their attorneys, and the impact of Conviction Integrity Units in Georgia's Legal System.*



# SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



## **RUTH VANN**

*Criminal Defense*

*Investigator/Mitigator*

Georgia Public Defender Council

Capital Unit

Ruth Vann is a criminal defense investigator for the Georgia Public Defender Council's capital unit. Collaborating with trial attorneys, forensic experts, and the client she investigates all particulars of a criminal case in preparation for trial/resolution. Ruth most enjoys interlacing the relational connection of field work with the critical facts of a homicide case in a way that crafts compelling case theories and strong mitigation narratives. A native of the Tar Heel State, Ruth's skills in people gathering, truth finding, and storytelling sprouted out of her work as a community organizer, art collective founder, public speaker, and religion/ethics educator. Her work in the death penalty community connects this interest in civic engagement with a deep commitment to the theological vision of the beloved community. When she is not tracking down a witness or analyzing murder weapons, Ruth can be found with her pet rabbit and a cup of tea, carefully planning her next travel adventure.



## **T. WRIGHT BARKSDALE**

*District Attorney*  
Ocmulgee Judicial  
Circuit

Wright Barksdale was elected as the District Attorney for the Ocmulgee Judicial Circuit in 2020. Before becoming the District Attorney, Mr. Barksdale served as an Assistant District Attorney managing two of the eight counties within the Ocmulgee Circuit. He has tried over fifty jury trials since becoming a prosecutor, most of which have been murders and complex felony cases. Since becoming the District Attorney, Mr.

Barksdale has tried two death penalty cases to verdict, obtaining the first death sentence in Georgia since 2017. Mr. Barksdale is a graduate of Georgia Southern University and obtained his law degree from Atlanta's John Marshall Law School in December of 2012. He is married to Katie Barksdale, and together they share three children: Tut (9), Kate (7), Griffin (5). They reside in Gray, Georgia.





## **S. Jill Benton**

*Federal Defender Program  
Supervisor, Capital Habeas Unit  
Northern District of Georgia*

Since graduating from the University of Georgia School of Law in 1999, Jill Benton has spent her career practicing with the capital habeas unit (CHU) of Federal Defender Program, the public defender office for the United States District Court in the Northern District of Georgia, working first as an investigator and staff attorney. Since 2016, Ms. Benton has served as the CHU's Chief. Ms. Benton has been involved in the representation of dozens of death-sentenced clients in habeas corpus challenges to the legality of their convictions and sentences, including in litigation before the United States Supreme Court, and related challenges. She has also represented clients in executive clemency proceedings before the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles. While she and her team have achieved successes against the odds, some of Ms. Benton's proudest career moments have come while fighting for clients who would ultimately be executed.



## **RYAN SWINGLE**

*Criminal Defense Attorney, Adjunct Professor*

University of Georgia School of Law,  
Former Georgia Capital Defender

**Ryan Swingle** is a solo practitioner in Athens, Georgia with a focus on all manner of criminal defense. Until early 2017, Ryan was the Director of the Northeast Georgia Regional Capital Defender Office in Athens, Georgia. The office, part of the Georgia Capital Defender Agency, is the first-line of defense for all death penalty cases in nearly forty counties in northeast Georgia. Ryan and the capital defense team in his office defended those people accused of the “worst of the worst” murders in Georgia.

Before moving into death penalty defense, Ryan was a Georgia state public defender for thirteen years. Ryan started out as a misdemeanor trial attorney at the Western Circuit Public Defender Office. After a year of seasoning in the high-volume, high-pressure world of misdemeanor public defense, Ryan began defending all manner of felony cases in Superior Court. As a public defender, Ryan represented people charged with everything from speeding, public intoxication and criminal trespass to rape, murder, and child molestation.

Ryan is a true believer and a criminal defense attorney to the core. With deep roots in Georgia’s public defender system, Ryan believes in and practices smart, aggressive, professional, client-centered criminal defense in all his cases, whether a misdemeanor DUI or a multiple victim murder case. Ryan’s most memorable cases include defending an accused serial rapist, representing a step-father accused of child torture, and defending a man charged with a murder-for-hire.

Ryan is a Double Dawg, having graduated from the University of Georgia as a criminal justice major and then the University of Georgia Law School. Ryan is a faculty member at multiple state and national trial training programs and has taught courses at the University of Georgia School of Law and for UGA undergraduates.



## **HOLLY LYNDE**

*Fiscal Analyst*

Carl Vinson Institute of Government

Holly Lynde has 25 years of experience working in policy and fiscal analysis. Based in Atlanta, Holly joined the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government in 2014. Holly's clients at the Institute of Government have included the Council of Accountability Court Judges, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, the Georgia General Assembly, Public Welfare Foundation, the Superior Court of Fulton County, the Vera Institute of Justice, and many others. Prior to joining the Institute of Government, Holly worked at the Southern Regional Education Board, the Washington State House of Representatives, and management consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton. She has a BA from Bucknell University and an MSc from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Holly is passionate about helping Georgia's local governments and state agencies address their most pressing criminal justice challenges, particularly the involvement of individuals with a mental health disorder. Holly leads a team of 14 facilitators across state government who provide Sequential Intercept Model (SIM) workshops that bring together the criminal justice and mental health systems in a local community to identify ways to divert people with mental health disorders away from the justice system and into treatment.

Her planning work with the Fulton County Justice and Mental Health Task Force led to improved reentry services at the Fulton County Jail and a recently announced Center for Diversion and Services. Holly is also a go-to resource for national organizations seeking to better understand Georgia's criminal justice system and reform efforts. She recently completed the *Georgia Criminal Justice Data Landscape Report*, which provides context, historical trends, and insights into the state's criminal justice system.

Dr. Sarah K.S. Shannon joined the UGA Sociology Department in 2013 after receiving her PhD (and MSW) from the University of Minnesota. Sarah's research focuses on systems of criminal punishment and their effects on social life. Her interdisciplinary research has been published in top journals in several fields including sociology, criminology, public health, social work, and geography.

Sarah is also an award-winning teacher, having received recognition for excellence in undergraduate instruction, research mentoring, creative teaching, and service-learning. She proudly facilitates UGA's first-ever Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

course in partnership with the Clarke County Jail (SOCI 4470S). As a publicly engaged scholar, Sarah's research has been cited in several high-profile media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and the *Washington Post*. Prior to her graduate work, Sarah worked in the non-profit sector. As a result, she cares about doing research that matters for academics, policy makers, and ordinary citizens.



**DR. SARAH SHANNON**  
*Associate Professor of Sociology*  
University of Georgia

## Joel Correa



Joel is Co-Director of the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation's (AVLF) Safe and Stable Families Project. Joel has over ten years of experience representing survivors of IPA in civil matters and leading teams of lawyers, social workers, paralegals, and other staff members serving survivors of intimate partner abuse. Currently, Joel manages and leads AVLF's Family Law Program, Guardian ad Litem Program, Safe Families Office, Social Worker and Advocacy Program, and Standing with Survivors mobile advocacy program. Prior to becoming Co-Director, Joel was the Managing Attorney in the Safe Families Office, a walk-in clinic that provides legal assistance to survivors of intimate partner abuse (IPA), where he represented hundreds of survivors in TPO and Family Law matters, and where he trained, mentored, and supervised dozens of law students who were certified to practice. In addition, Joel and his team train and provide litigation support to attorneys who represent survivors of IPA in TPO hearings and other family law matters in Fulton County.

Before joining AVLF, Joel spent five years at the Georgia Law Center for the Homeless, where he represented individuals experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness in civil matters ranging from landlord-tenant law, protective orders, family law, and social security disability appeals. Joel earned his JD from Florida Coastal School of Law and his B.A. in International Studies and French from Berry College. Joel currently serves on the boards of the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Atlanta Bar Association's Family Law Section. He is a member of the Georgia Hispanic Bar Association, and he serves as mentor with the Georgia Latino Law Foundation.

## Joanna Helsby



Joanna is the Deputy Chief of the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (DVSA) Unit for the DeKalb County District Attorney's Office. This unit is comprised of 11 attorneys, 11 investigators, 4 victim advocates and 4 trial assistants. The DVSA Unit investigates and prosecutes felony cases involving high lethality intimate partner violence, intimate partner homicide and adult sexual assault.



Joanna has been a prosecutor for 13 years and has worked in the DeKalb County District Attorney's Office, Fulton County Solicitor General and District Attorney's Offices.

Joanna received her B.A. from Duke University in 2003 and her law degree from the Emory University School of Law. Joanna is also a board member for the International Women's House, a non-profit offering a safe-haven and supportive services for women and children who are victims of family violence, sexual abuse, and human trafficking.

## Jennifer Thomas



Jennifer Thomas has worked to empower survivors of abuse since she began her social services career, as a child advocate in 2004 in rural Georgia. She is well recognized as a subject matter expert and positive leader in the domestic violence movement, and regularly provides training and technical assistance on the state and national levels. Jennifer is currently the Director of Strategic Partnerships for the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). In this role, Jennifer partners with local and state stakeholders to provide support and technical assistance to programs receiving funding from CJCC's Victim Assistance Division.

Prior to joining CJCC, Jennifer was the Executive Director for the Georgia Commission on Family Violence (GCFV), a state agency charged with ending family violence in Georgia. Jennifer has had the opportunity to support the success of a number of family violence initiatives including the interdisciplinary review of domestic violence fatalities, the certification of Family Violence Intervention Programs for offenders, the collaboration and coordination of Family Violence Task Forces and other community-based alliances, and the provision of education to the public.

Jennifer is a Board Member for the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project located in Duluth, Minnesota and was awarded the 2013 Gender Justice Award from the Georgia Commission on Family Violence for her work with incarcerated female victims of intimate partner violence. Jennifer holds bachelor's degrees in Sociology and Psychology from Piedmont College and a Master's of Social Work from the University of Georgia. In addition, Jennifer earned her Certified Public Managers Certification from the Carl Vinson Institute of Government in 2018.

## Benjamin Pearlman



Benjamin Pearlman is the Deputy Chief Assistant Public Defender at the Western Judicial Circuit Public Defender's Office in Athens, representing indigent people charged with crimes in Clarke and Oconee Counties. He currently represents clients whose cases are on appeal to the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals of Georgia, those charged with serious felonies, and clients diagnosed with mental illness who have been caught up in the criminal justice system. He has a B.A. in Classical Languages from Carleton College, and graduated *cum*

*laude* from the University of Georgia School of Law in 2001. After graduation, he clerked for the Superior Court judges of the Western Judicial Circuit in Athens. Following that clerkship, he was hired as an associate at Daniels & Rothman, P.C., in Athens, specializing in criminal defense and related constitutional issues. In 2004, he was hired by the University of Georgia Legal Aid and Defender Clinic (later to become the Western Circuit Public Defender's Office), and has been employed there ever since. Over the course of his career, Mr. Pearlman has argued multiple times before the Georgia Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court of Georgia, and has tried over 100 cases involving charges ranging from speeding to murder.



**LEIGH SCHROPE, ESQ.**

*Partner*

Shein, Brandenburg & Schrope

Leigh Schrope has dedicated her career to criminal defense and has worked with a variety of clients, juvenile and adult, in Georgia state courts and federal courts around the country. She has received two Case of the Year Awards from the Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers for her advocacy in the Georgia Supreme Court.

Upon graduating from Emory Law School with honors in 2003, Leigh had a short stint in the civil world but, after two years, she was ready to return to her passion, and accepted the newly created position as the Juvenile Appeals Attorney at the Georgia Public Defender Standards Council (“GPDSC”). Leigh was promoted to Senior Appellate Supervising Attorney at GPDSC, where

she ran the day to day operations of the Appellate Division of GPDSC. In this role, Leigh continued to represent criminal defendants in direct appeals and GPDSC’s interest as *Amicus* in direct appeals and petitions for a writ of certiorari. Additionally, Leigh reviewed, revised, and edited briefs from public defenders around the State, assisted public defenders in representing their clients at trial and on appeal, answered questions from prisoners and their families; fielded between 20-50 case related inquiries monthly, acted as an advisor to the director and deputy directors of the agency on appellate issues, planned appellate training curriculum, participated in training sessions as a member of the faculty, planned and supervised the projects and services of the Appellate Division, reviewed cases from around the State to determine whether there is an ineffective assistance of counsel claim, and supervised the staff and interns of the Appellate Division.

Leigh resigned from GPDSC to spend more time with her family. She continued her legal advocacy, however, by performing contract work for the Law Firm of Shein & Brandenburg and other prominent defense attorneys. In 2015, Leigh joined the Law Firm of Shein, Brandenburg & Schrope, where she continues to represent clients facing criminal prosecution or serving sentences for criminal convictions, including representing clients pre-trial, on direct appeal, in post-conviction proceedings, and when seeking parole.





**AIMEE MAXWELL, ESQ.**

*Chief Senior Assistant District Attorney*  
*Conviction Integrity Unit, Fulton County District Attorney's Office*

Aimee Maxwell is an attorney with almost 40 years of criminal law experience and is one of the country's leading experts in investigating and litigating post-conviction innocence claims. Aimee received her J.D. from Georgia State University College of Law, her Masters of Education from Georgia State University and her Bachelor of Arts in political science from the University of Georgia. As the founding Executive Director of the Georgia Innocence Project, Aimee has litigated innocence claims throughout Georgia. She joined the Fulton County District Attorney's office in 2019 as the director of the Conviction Integrity Unit. Aimee is honored to join District Attorney Fani Willis' administration where she seeks to use her experience, commitment and passion to serve our citizens by ensuring the integrity of the justice system in Fulton County.

Aimee has significant experience handling complex felony criminal cases. In addition to her innocence work, Aimee was a criminal defense lawyer, first in private practice then with the State at the Georgia Indigent Defense Council. She also worked with a labor union representing government employees, including law enforcement officers in Atlanta and Fulton County. Recently, Aimee worked with the Judicial Council of Georgia's Administrative Office of the Courts to promote the integrity of the judicial branch and to improve justice in Georgia. Aimee is active in many bar associations including the Association of Prosecuting Attorneys and the State Bar of Georgia's High School Mock Trial Committee. She previously served as a Past-President of the Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyer and as a former Board Member of the Innocence Network. Aimee currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence. She is the recipient of the Ben F. Johnson Public Service Award from Georgia State College of Law, the Commitment to the Profession from the Younger Lawyers Section of the Georgia Bar, the Inspiration Award from Emory Law, the SOAR Award from GSU Law and the 2020 Law and Justice Women of the Year Award.



## **MARIO STINCHCOMB**

### *Exoneree*

Mario Stinchcomb was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. He grew up poor and moved around a lot. He was an avid and passionate football player and he hoped that a career in football would help lift him and his family out of poverty. He was playing football for Tri-City High School in Eastpoint as a starter and premier back the summer of his Eleventh Grade year when he broke his neck during a practice, ending his football career. The life he had envisioned for himself was over and Mario felt lost. On November 9, 2002, 22-year old Mario was arrested for the murder of Jakesha Young. Mario and Michael Woolfolk consistently told the same story from the date of their arrest – Michael Woolfolk fired the fatal shot (though they did not know at the time she had been hit) in self-defense because Ms. Young was shooting at them. The jury convicted both Michael and Mario and, in 2004, they were sentenced to life in prison. Mario refused to accept that he would spend the rest of his life in prison for a crime he did not commit. In 2018, Mario hired the Law Firm of Shein, Brandenburg & Schrope to determine if they could file an extraordinary motion for new trial on his behalf. After locating and speaking with a witness who was present on the night of the shooting, but who everyone believed was dead at the time of trial, the Law Firm of Shein, Brandenburg & Schrope filed an extraordinary motion for new trial on Mario's behalf. After three-years of legal maneuvering, including a trip to the Georgia Supreme Court, the Fulton County Conviction Integrity Unit, headed by Aimee Maxwell, agreed to review and investigate Mario's case, interviewed the newly located witness, and agreed that Mario should be exonerated. On April 21, 2021, a jointly drafted consent order granting the extraordinary motion for new trial was filed, exonerating Mario, and the charges against Mario were dismissed. The charges against Michael were likewise dismissed shortly after.

Since his exoneration, Mario has been enjoying spending time with his family, including his loving wife and children, who supported him through his entire ordeal. He has also started a trucking company and enjoys time on the road seeing the country. He volunteers his time to speak to students in Atlanta about his life.





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