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Benjamin LaGuer Papers

1980-2020
12 boxes (17 linear feet)
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Read collection overview

Benjamin LaGuer was born in the Bronx in 1963, lived in Puerto Rico with his mother between the ages of eleven and fifteen, and then moved back to the US, settling with his father in Leominster, Massachusetts. After a one year stint in the US Army, LaGuer was arrested for raping and murdering his elderly neighbor in Leominster. He maintained his innocence, rejecting a plea could have released him after a couple years, and going to trial, where he was convicted by an all-white jury to life in prison in 1984. LaGuer fought for his innocence and earned a bachelor's degree from Boston University. His writing and intellectual powers brought together a diverse group of supporters, including Leslie Epstein, John Silber, Noam Chomsky, Ellen Story, and Deval Patrick, whose support was used against him when he ran for Governor of Massachusetts. LaGuer was denied parole several times because he refused to admit guilt, and passed away from liver cancer on November 4, 2020, alone in a prison hospital.

The Benjamin LaGuer Papers include the twenty boxes LaGuer was allowed to have with him in prison and contain his writings, correspondence, legal files documenting his attempts to prove his innocence, and personal effects. Added to this collection is material original housed at Northeastern University, collected by Eric Goldscheider during the journalist's time reporting on LaGuer and developing a close friendship.

Background on Benjamin LaGuer

LaGuer was born May 1, 1963 in the Bronx, New York. Growing up, he lived in Puerto Rico with his mother and then in New York state and Leominster, Massachusetts with his father. From 1980 to 1983, LaGuer served in the US Army until he was discharged under honorable conditions.

In 1983, when he was twenty years old and soon after being discharged, LaGuer was arrested of aggravated assault and rape of a neighbor in Leominster. LaGuer maintained his innocence, rejecting a plea deal that could have sent him to prison for a few years. In 1984, LaGuer was convicted by an all-white jury of aggregated rape, breaking and entering, and unarmed robbery. The rape charge carried a life sentence.

LaGuer was sentenced to life in prison with eligibility for parole. He was first placed in Massachusetts Correctional Institution (MCI) Cedar Junction, then was transferred to North Central Correctional Institution (NCCI) in Gardner in 1985. In 1994, he was transferred to MCI Norfolk, and in 2005, he was transferred to Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center (SBCC) maximum security prison in Lancaster. In 2007, he was transferred again to NCCI Gardner.

While incarcerated, LaGuer continuously built the case for his innocence. Through his efforts and the efforts of his legal team and supporters, evidence was unearthed supporting his innocence. A jury member admitted that racial slurs were used during jury deliberation, this racism creating an unfair process. The survivor of the attack had previously been institutionalized for mental illness and had to be coached through her testimony, casting doubt on her reliability. Furthermore, there were questions over tainted and illegally-obtained evidence.

Despite these legal efforts, LaGuer was consistently denied the attempts at parole throughout the years. LaGuer's refusal to admit guilt and undergo a sex offender treatment program (which officially required him to admit guilt) contributed to the Parole Board's decisions.

While incarcerated, LaGuer earned a bachelor's degree in liberal studies, graduating summa cum laude, from Boston University. He also earned credits at UMass Amherst. LaGuer enjoyed writing and had pieces published in multiple periodicals—he even won a PEN award for an essay titled “A Man Who Loves his Mother Loves Women.”

LaGuer was an avid epistolary and telephone correspondent. He corresponded with well-known figures including John Silber, president of Boston University, Leslie Epstein, Elie Wiesel, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Noam Chomsky, Deval Patrick, and Michael Dukakis. Deval Patrick's correspondence and support of LaGuer (Patrick helped pay for DNA testing in 2002 in hopes of proving LaGuer's innocence) a role in the 2006 gubernatorial race.

In February, 2020, LaGuer was granted compassionate release due to liver cancer but was again incarcerated a month later. LaGuer died alone in the Lemuel Shattuck Hospital in Boston on November 4, 2020. He spent over thirty-five years of his life in prison.

Scope of collection

The Benjamin LaGuer Papers are comprised of legal papers, letters, photographs, video and audio recordings, and ephemera that LaGuer was allowed to have with him in prison as well as material originally housed at Northeastern University, collected by journalist Eric Goldscheider. These records detail LaGuer's experiences from his arrest until his death, providing insight into complexities at the intersection of race, justice, media and politics in Massachusetts and the United States.

The collection's vast legal materials includes court records, trial transcript, police reports, forensic reports, judicial decisions and correspondence with lawyers and other legal professionals. Accompanying these materials are extensive press coverage comprised of newspaper articles, audio cassettes of conversations with LaGuer, radio interviews, and other media published about LaGuer. LaGuer's personal life while incarcerated is also represented in the collection; materials include announcements to the incarcerated people, visitor information, telephone records, commissary lists, information on LaGuer's finances, disciplinary reports, and classification reports. Additionally, the collection contains an abundance of correspondence—letters to and from LaGuer and his family, including his mother, siblings, and other relatives, and his friends and supporters, including John Silber, John Archer, Leslie Epstein, Elie Wiesel, Martín Espada, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Noam Chomsky, Deval Patrick, and Michael Dukakis. There are also letters to and from literary agencies, publishers, and reporters.

Series descriptions

[Series 1. Personal](#) 1980-2020

This includes the personal effects of Benjamin LaGuer: correspondence with family, friends, press, and publishers, bills, material possessions, religious materials, personal notes, essays and poetry, and materials related to LaGuer's education and time in the army; also includes all documentation of and related to LaGuer's incarceration.

Series includes materials produced by prisons and various materials LaGuer collected while incarcerated. Announcements to the incarcerated people; visitor information; telephone records; commissary lists; information on LaGuer's finances, including receipts; disciplinary reports; classification reports; contact lists; and photos are included here. Also included are LaGuer's personal writings, including poetry written for courses at Boston University and published works; materials related to education, including transcripts; and news clippings and readings LaGuer collected.

[Series 2. Legal](#)

1983-2020

Contains court transcripts, motions, appeals, and data related to Commonwealth v. LaGuer; contains legal correspondence between Benjamin LaGuer and his lawyers and public figures in law.

Materials include court records, trial transcripts, police reports, forensic reports, judicial decisions, and a correspondence subseries containing correspondence with lawyers and other legal professionals.

[Series 3. Press](#)

1984-2020

Contains news clippings collected by Benjamin LaGuer related to his case, similar cases, the Massachusetts 2006 Gubernatorial Election, and general publications about politics and pop culture.

Materials includes newspaper articles (both print and digital media), published writings by LaGuer, audio cassettes of conversations with LaGuer, radio interviews, and other media published about LaGuer in popular and scholarly press.

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- Criminal justice, Administration of
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- Prisoners--Massachusetts

- Prisons--Massachusetts

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- Patrick, Deval
- Silber, John, 1926-2012

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