

## “Crime After Crime” Is Documentary About Deborah Peagler’s Murder Conviction And The Campaign To Free Her

Deborah “Debbie” Denise Peagler was 23 when sentenced to 25 years to life in prison in California after she pled guilty in 1983 to first-degree murder in the death of Oliver Wilson, who was killed by two gang members.

Because there was no trial it wasn’t publicly disclosed that Wilson terrorized Peagler into prostituting herself by physically beating her and psychological abuse that included threatening to kill her and forcing her to play Russian Roulette. When she tried to escape Wilson would track her down and after beating her and even using a whip on her, she would be forced to resume prostituting herself. When Peagler found out that Wilson abused her 6-year-old daughter she fled again and sought the help of two gang members to make Wilson leave her and her daughter alone. Wilson was killed during a violent encounter with the two gang members in a public park. Peagler wasn’t present when Wilson was killed, but she was charged with conspiracy and first-degree murder. Peagler’s public defender convinced her to plead guilty because the LA County DA threatened to seek the death penalty if she went to trial and lost.

In 2002 California enacted a law that retroactively allowed a battered woman to challenge her conviction if evidence related to her abuse hadn’t been considered when she was convicted. After the California Habeas Project interviewed Peagler and determined she might be eligible for relief under the law, Nadia Costa and Joshua Safran, real estate lawyers with no criminal law experience, agreed to take Peagler’s case pro bono. There were then able to convince a private investigator to work on her case pro bono. Costa and Safran worked on Peagler’s case for seven years before she was released in 2009 after 27 years of incarceration from the time of her arrest.

She should have been released four years earlier, but in 2005 Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley reneged on his written agreement supporting the vacating of Peagler’s first-degree murder conviction

based on the evidence she was abused by Wilson, and for it to be substituted with her guilty plea to voluntary manslaughter and a sentence of time served. DA Cooley [even wrote that](#) the agreement “serves the interests of justice.” After Cooley reneged Peagler’s lawyers sued for enforcement of the agreement, but they lost.

In 2007 the investigator working on Peagler’s case obtained a copy of a memo written on October 26, 1983 by an assistant district attorney that had been kept secret for 24 years by the DAs Office. The memo details that the DAs Office knew the informant who was the key witness against Peagler and the two males accused of murdering Wilson committed perjury during Peagler’s preliminary hearing -- and that it not only undermined his credibility, but his perjured testimony was the only evidence that supported seeking the death penalty against her. Also undermining the informant’s credibility was the [memo’s statement that](#) “He was also suspected of dealing in narcotics and stolen goods.” Although the memo included information that could possibly result in Peagler’s acquittal by a jury, the DAs Office concealed it as it continued to put pressure on her lawyer that she could get the death penalty if he didn’t convince her to plead guilty to first-degree murder. One of the people involved in concealing the memo from Peagler was Frederick P. Horn, a prosecutor involved in her case and who is now an Orange County Superior Court judge.

Peagler was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer in February 2009, and on July 10, 2009 the California Board of Parole Hearings found she was suitable for a compassionate release. DA Cooley sent a letter to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger that suggested Peagler shouldn’t be released.

On August 19, 2009 Peagler’s family members and other supporters protested outside Schwarzenegger’s Los Angeles office, demanding her release. The next day Schwarzenegger declined to review the parole board’s finding, which allowed their decision to stand. Peagler was released two days later on August 22.

Debbie Peagler died on June 8, 2010. She was 50.



Debbie Peagler with her lawyers Joshua Safran and Nadia Costa before her release from prison. (Life Sentence Films)

Beginning in 2005 filmmaker Yoav Potash began chronicling the efforts of Costa and Safran to free Peagler. The result is the documentary *Crime After Crime* which premiered in January 2011 at the Sundance Film Festival. *Crime*

*After Crime* has gotten rave reviews from Los Angeles to New York. On [rottentomatoes.com](#) 89% of the professional reviews are positive, and it was liked by 100% of the people who saw it and registered their opinion. *The New York Daily News*’ gave the *Crime After Crime* 4 stars and its review [states in part](#):

If you’re looking for a movie to shake you to your core, skip “Transformers” and seek out Yoav Potash’s gut-wrenching documentary, instead. He gives us extraordinary heroes and unbelievable villains, mind-bending twists and heart-breaking turns.

His subject is Deborah Peagler who’s serving a life sentence for killing a pimp who forced her into prostitution and sexually abused their toddler. Her devoted, pro bono attorneys work for years to expose the ineptitude and corruption that has seemingly led to an illegal imprisonment; Potash chronicles it all with compassion.

This story doesn’t go well with popcorn, and you won’t be able to shake it off like so many blockbusters. That said, it’s likely to be the most unforgettable film you see all summer.



Free Debbie Peagler protesters outside Governor Schwarzenegger’s Los Angeles office on August 19, 2009. (Life Sentence Films)



“Crime After Crime” poster

[Click here for Crime After Crime’s website.](#) The DVD of *Crime After Crime* can be ordered from the website for \$19.95.

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