

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
IN THE SUPREME COURT

Certiorari to the Court of Appeals
Appeal from Richland County
Kristi F. Curtis, Circuit Court Judge

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Opinion No. 2024-UP-223 (S.C. Ct. App. Filed June 26, 2024)

Lower Court Case No. 2016-CP-40-04677

MICHAEL ORLANDO BROWN,

PETITIONER,

V.

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA,

RESPONDENT.

APPELLATE CASE NO. 2024-001541

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI
TO THE COURT OF APPEALS

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CERTIFICATE OF COUNSEL

Counsel for Petitioner certifies that the Petition for Rehearing was made and finally ruled on by the Court of Appeals on August 15, 2024.

QUESTION PRESENTED

Did the Court of Appeals err by holding the PCR court correctly found Petitioner was not prejudiced by trial counsel's deficient performance where counsel failed to contemporaneously object to the admission of Petitioner's alleged statements to law enforcement in which Petitioner allegedly offered to plead guilty to a lesser offense after counsel moved pretrial to suppress the statements pursuant to Rule 403, SCRE, since there is a reasonable probability Petitioner would have prevailed on appeal had trial counsel properly preserved the issue?

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

The state alleged at trial that Petitioner attempted to rob a Chuck E. Cheese in Columbia shortly before it closed on January 3, 2013. An armed Black man wearing a brown wig and a red bandana around his neck entered the establishment at 9:38 pm. App. 172, ll. 16-18. While there were no customers inside at the time of the offense, there were four employees who were preparing to close for the evening. Kadeshia Green and Kyrie Green were breaking down the salad bar. App. 171, ll. 1-10. Ronnie Kennedy-Martin, the manager, was in the back office. App. 174, ll. 11-12. Finally, a woman only identified as Anna was working in the kitchen. App. 171, ll. 11-14; App. 186, ll. 11-12.

Kadeshia, who saw the armed man as he entered the front door, ran to the office and alerted Ronnie. App. 173, l. 21 – 174, l. 10. The man then grabbed Kyrie, put a gun to his back, and ordered him to walk to the back. App. 190, l. 9 – 192, l. 20; App. 174, ll. 14-24. As the man and Kyrie were walking toward the kitchen, the man demanded Kyrie “take [him] to the money.” App. 192, ll. 21-24; App. 197, ll. 14-21. However, once the robber saw Ronnie and Kadeshia coming out of the office, he pushed Kyrie to the side, turned, and fled out the front door. App. 193, ll. 3-17

Ronnie called the police. App. 279, ll. 18-25. The patrol officer who responded requested the assistance of a K-9 to attempt to track the suspect. App. 126, ll. 12-20. The police dog allegedly tracked a scent from the entrance of the Chuck E. Cheese to an area behind the nearby El Toro restaurant, where a wig and bandana were located. App. 156, l. 6 – 159, l. 16. The wig and bandana were both analyzed for DNA. Although no DNA was found on the wig, Petitioner was determined to be the major contributor to a mixture of DNA found on the bandana. App. 300, l. 18 -301, l. 12; App. 305, l. 17 – 309, l. 13. Despite the presence of two other individuals’ DNA on the bandana, Petitioner was arrested on March 14, 2013. App. 304, l. 13 – 305, l. 7; App. 260, ll. 22-23.

A Richland County Grand Jury indicted Petitioner on April 9, 2014 for attempted armed robbery. App. 708-709. His case was called to trial on August 4, 2014 before the Honorable James R. Barber, and a jury. App. 1. Assistant Solicitors Luck Campbell, Meghan Walker, and Sandra Moser represented the state. App. 1. Anastasia Walker and Alicia Goode represented Petitioner. App. 1.

Petitioner moved pretrial to suppress the oral statement he allegedly made to Investigator Robert Martin shortly after his arrest. Specifically, Petitioner sought to exclude his alleged statements offering to plead guilty to a lesser offense and his alleged statement that the “DNA will convict me.” App. 70, l. 23 – 76, l. 23; App. 78, l. 7 – 79, l. 16; App. 93, l. 17 – 100, l. 11.

Investigator Martin claimed during the pretrial hearing that he advised Petitioner of his Miranda rights and, after Martin read each right to Petitioner, Petitioner signed an acknowledgment of rights. App. 58, l. 3 – 60, l. 18. Martin then read the waiver of rights, which Petitioner also signed. App. 60, l. 19 – 61, l. 24. After he advised Petitioner of his rights, Martin said he discussed with Petitioner “what he was charged with and how he came to that charge, because his DNA was left behind at the scene.” App. 62, ll. 11-15. When asked if he had ever been to Chuck E. Cheese, Petitioner said he attended a party there in 2011 or 2012, but that he had not been in the area since then. App. 62, ll. 16-20; App. 63, ll. 1-5. Petitioner denied ever having worn a wig and told Martin he could not explain why his DNA would have been found at the scene.¹ App. 62, ll. 21-25.

Martin testified Petitioner refused to provide a DNA sample and said “it [the DNA] would convict [me].” App. 63, ll. 6-14. According to Martin, Petitioner “didn’t really deny the evidence.” App. 63, l. 19. Rather, Petitioner allegedly said he would not challenge the DNA and that “he knew

¹ Petitioner’s DNA was not found at the scene. It was found on a portable object, the red bandana, that was allegedly used in the attempted armed robbery.

DNA would be enough to convict him.” App. 63, ll. 19-22. Martin also alleged Petitioner asked if he could be charged with a less serious offense because he “knew that this carried the possibility of life.”² App. 63, l. 23 – 64, l. 1. Martin admitted Petitioner eventually indicated he did not want to talk about his case anymore. He was then allowed to use Martin’s office phone to call his girlfriend, Judy Castro. App. 64, l. 18 – 65, l. 1.

The only recording of the interview was in the form of Martin’s sparse interview notes. App. 65, l. 22 – 67, l. 8. Martin was not sure how long the interview with Petitioner lasted. App. 65, ll. 13-21; App. 67, l. 20. He was also unable to recall when in the interview he (Martin) requested Petitioner voluntarily provide a DNA sample, but said it was “either during or at the end.” App. 66, ll. 10-15. When asked about it again, Martin repeated that he “[did not] remember if it was during or at the end or before he [Petitioner] made the phone call.” App. 69, l. 25 – 70, l. 4.

According to Martin, in conjunction with his request to be charged with something less serious, Petitioner “said he wanted a plea in this case.” App. 69, ll. 3-5. This was the only reference Martin made to discussion of a plea during his testimony at the pretrial suppression hearing. He admitted his notes indicated that when he asked Petitioner for a DNA sample, “he [Petitioner] declined until he had spoken to an attorney.” App. 66, ll. 16-22. Martin further admitted his notes did not mention Petitioner’s alleged statement that he would not give his DNA because it would convict him. App. 66, ll. 23-25.

Martin was sitting next to Petitioner when Petitioner called his girlfriend, Castro. Martin heard Petitioner’s side of the conversation where he told Castro he did not commit the crime and was being framed. App. 67, ll. 16-17; App. 69, ll. 6-21. Afterward, Martin “attempted to explore

² Petitioner was indicted for attempted armed robbery, which carries a potential penalty of up to twenty years. S.C. Code Ann. § 16-11-330.

that avenue” by asking Petitioner who would frame him, but Petitioner did not give him any information. App. 69, ll. 13-19.

Trial counsel argued Martin was unable to confirm how long the interview lasted or when in the interview Petitioner declined to provide a known DNA sample. This was important because Petitioner’s refusal to give a DNA sample was coupled with a statement that he wanted to speak with an attorney first. Thus, any further questioning of Petitioner was in violation of his right to counsel. App. 70, l. 23 – 71, l. 17. The assistant solicitor argued Investigator Martin testified he stopped the interrogation once Petitioner said he was not going to give a DNA sample until he talked to an attorney. App. 71, l. 18-24.

The trial judge found there was no question Petitioner made a statement. The disagreement was about the content of the statement. App. 71, l. 25 – 72, l. 5. He found the statement was made voluntarily after Petitioner was advised of his rights and made a knowing waiver of those rights. App. 72, ll. 6-16. However, the judge admitted he had some concerns. App. 72, l. 17. He noted that Martin testified Petitioner made a statement “I’m not going to give a DNA sample, because it would convict me.” He found Martin further testified that when Petitioner chose to exercise his right to remain silent, the interview stopped. The judge said he would take that to mean Petitioner first made the statement he was “not going to give DNA because it would convict [him]” and then at some point later said I need to talk to an attorney, which is when the questioning stopped. App. 72, l. 17 – 73, l. 2.

The judge asked the solicitor if the state was intending to elicit testimony that Petitioner was facing life in prison, which was connected to some of the reasons for the alleged statements. App. 73, ll. 3-5. The solicitor said she was not, and the judge responded that he was “not having any of that,” *i.e.* that the jury could not be made aware of the potential life sentence Petitioner faced if

convicted. App. 73, ll. 3-10. Additionally, the judge ruled the state was not allowed to reference Petitioner's refusal to provide a DNA sample. App. 73, l. 10 – 74, l. 19. However, he was “sort of inclined to maybe” admit the portion of Petitioner's alleged statement where he said DNA would convict him, even though it was said in combination with his refusal to provide a DNA sample. App. 74, l. 22 – 76, l. 23.

Trial counsel also argued for the exclusion of Petitioner's alleged offer to plead guilty. The judge initially instructed the state that it was not allowed to elicit the fact that Petitioner offered to plead guilty. App. 78, ll. 7-14. However, the solicitor argued the statement was not a part of any formal plea negotiation between Petitioner's attorney and the solicitor's office or in response to any prompting by the investigator. App. 78, l. 15 – 79, l. 1. After the judge indicated he would “think about it,” trial counsel argued that, in addition to the statement being inadmissible because it was a part of plea negotiations, the statement was more prejudicial than probative and did not amount to a confession. App. 79, ll. 2-16.

The judge eventually took a brief recess to allow both parties to conduct additional research in support of their positions. App. 93, l. 17 – 94, l. 25. After the break, the solicitor referred the judge to Rule 410(4), SCRE, which prohibits the use of a statement made to a prosecuting attorney during plea negotiations. App. 95, l. 17 – 97, l. 12. When asked “exactly” what Petitioner allegedly said, the solicitor asserted she understood his statement to be, “Can you help me with a plea, I want to plead guilty.” App. 97, ll. 15-19. She said the “gist” of the conversation was “I don't want to plead guilty to this charge because this charge carries life but if there is something else that doesn't carry life, I can plead guilty.” App. 97, l. 20 – 98, l. 7. The judge emphasized that if that statement

was true then Petitioner would have pled guilty instead of exercising his right to a jury trial.³ App. 98, ll. 8-9.

Trial counsel clarified that Martin's notes actually indicate: "Brown [Petitioner] said he was not going to fight the DNA. Brown wanted to know if he could be charged with something less serious. He said he planned on trying to plead to this charge." App. 98, l. 24 – 99, l. 4. The notes did not contain a direct quotation from Petitioner, but rather Martin's interpretation of what was said. Trial counsel argued that even if Petitioner was mistaken in speaking about a plea with law enforcement rather than the solicitor, the alleged statement should still be excluded. App. 99, ll. 5-9. The judge ruled Petitioner's statement that he planned to plead guilty to the charge was admissible. App. 99, ll. 10-14. He also ruled the statement "DNA will convict me" was admissible, but could not be related to the fact that Petitioner refused to voluntarily provide a DNA sample. App. 100, ll. 5-11.

When Investigator Martin testified before the jury concerning Petitioner's alleged statements, Petitioner's trial counsel failed to contemporaneously object thereby failing to preserve the objection for appellate review. App. 217, l. 15 – 220, l. 8; App. 222, l. 5 – 225, l. 1; App. 226, l. 23 – 227, l. 17.

During her closing argument, the assistant solicitor repeatedly referenced Petitioner's alleged statement "I want to plead guilty" and argued it was direct evidence of his guilt. App. 350, ll. 3-5; App. 351, ll. 6-8; App. 358, ll. 9-10; App. 360, ll. 12-13; App. 361, l. 6. She further argued his statement reflected that "[a]t that point in time he wanted to take responsibility for his actions" and that an innocent man would not make such a statement. App. 358, ll. 16-25. The solicitor also

³ The judge was alluding to the state's offer to recommend a fifteen year sentence if Petitioner pled guilty. App. 6, l. 3 – 9, l. 15.

asserted Petitioner's alleged statement that "the DNA alone is enough to convict me" was direct evidence of his guilt. App. 351, ll. 6-8.

On August 5, 2014, the jury found Petitioner guilty of attempted armed robbery as indicted. App. 395, ll. 9-19. He was sentenced to life without parole pursuant to S.C. Code Ann. § 17-25-45. App. 403, ll. 12-16.

The Court of Appeals affirmed Petitioner's conviction and sentence. State v. Brown, 2016-UP-349 (S.C. Ct. App. filed July 6, 2016); App. 504-505. On appeal, Petitioner argued the trial judge abused his discretion in admitting Petitioner's alleged offer to plead guilty where the probative value of the statement was outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice pursuant to Rule 403, SCRE. He also argued the trial judge abused his discretion in admitting Petitioner's alleged statement that the "DNA will convict me" and alleged offer to plead guilty since such statements were made after Petitioner had invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and right to counsel. App. 412. However, the Court of Appeals held these issues were not preserved for appellate review since trial counsel failed to contemporaneously object when the statements were admitted at trial. App. 504-505.

On August 3, 2016, Petitioner filed an application for post-conviction relief (PCR) raising the claim argued in this petition. App. 508-515. The state filed a return to this application dated June 30, 2017. App. 516-521. An evidentiary hearing was convened on February 19, 2019 before the Honorable Kristi Curtis. App. 522. Assistant Attorney General Lindsey McAllister represented the state, and Leah Moody represented Petitioner. App. 522. By order filed September 4, 2019, the PCR judge denied Petitioner relief. App. 682-707.

In his PCR application, Petitioner argued trial counsel was ineffective for failing to contemporaneously object to the admission of Petitioner's alleged statements to law enforcement.

During the evidentiary hearing, Anastasia Walker, Petitioner's trial counsel, admitted she failed to contemporaneously object when Petitioner's alleged statements were admitted before the jury during Investigator Martin's testimony. She testified that she did not realize her mistake until the Court of Appeals issued its unpublished opinion asserting the arguments raised on appeal were not preserved. App. 642, ll. 16-23. Walker asserted it was "complete neglect on [her] part" for failing to object when the statements were admitted. Unfortunately, at the time, she "had not thought" to object. App. 643, ll. 1-5.

The PCR court denied Petitioner relief. App. 682-707. While the court found trial counsel was deficient for failing to contemporaneously object when the state admitted Petitioner's alleged statements through Investigator Martin during trial thereby failing to preserve the issue for appellate review, the court concluded Petitioner failed to prove prejudice because Petitioner would not have prevailed on appeal if counsel had properly objected.

The PCR court found Petitioner was advised of his Miranda rights both orally and in writing before he was questioned by Investigator Martin and voluntarily waived his rights. Consequently, the PCR court concluded Petitioner's alleged statement that he knew the DNA evidence would convict him was admissible as evidence of consciousness of guilt and the trial court properly admitted the statement. App. 697. As to Petitioner's alleged statements offering to plead guilty to a lesser offense, the PCR court likewise concluded they were properly admitted at trial as evidence of consciousness of guilt. App. 697. The court asserted the statements were not excluded by Rule 410, SCRE, since the statements were made to a police officer and not to a prosecuting attorney during plea negotiations. App. 697. The court further found the statements were made "unprompted by law enforcement" after Petitioner had been advised of his Miranda rights. App. 697. Because the PCR court determined the trial court's decision to admit the statements was correct, the court

concluded it was not reasonably likely that Petitioner would have prevailed on appeal had the issues been preserved for appellate review. App. 697-698.

On April 1, 2020, Petitioner filed a petition for writ of certiorari with the Supreme Court. Petitioner argued the PCR court “erred by finding Petitioner was not prejudiced by trial counsel’s deficient performance where counsel failed to contemporaneously object to the admission of Petitioner’s alleged statements to law enforcement in which Petitioner allegedly offered to plead guilty to a lesser offense after counsel moved pretrial to suppress the statements pursuant to Rule 403, SCRE, since there is a reasonable probability Petitioner would have prevailed on appeal had trial counsel properly preserved the issue for appeal.”

The state filed a return to this petition on September 10, 2020. By order filed September 23, 2020, this Court transferred the appeal to the Court of Appeals pursuant to Rule 243(l), SCACR. On August 5, 2022, the Court of Appeals granted the petition for writ of certiorari and ordered further briefing pursuant to Rule 243(j), SCACR.

In an unpublished opinion, the Court of Appeals held Petitioner was not prejudiced by trial counsel’s failure to contemporaneously object to the admission of his statement to law enforcement because the probative value of Petitioner’s offer to plead guilty to a lesser offense was not substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice. The Court of Appeals concluded Petitioner’s offer to plead guilty was “highly probative of consciousness of guilt.” As to unfair prejudice, the court determined Petitioner’s statement “does not carry an undue tendency to suggest a decision on an improper basis.” Despite this holding, the court asserted, “the extent to which the statement carries such a tendency does not outweigh the statement’s probative value, as would be required to warrant suppression under Rule 403.” This subsequent

finding acknowledges that Petitioner’s statement does have some “tendency to suggest a decision on an improper basis.”

The Court of Appeals then addressed Rule 410(4), SCRE.⁴ The court held the PCR court correctly concluded that “a plain reading of the rule precludes its application” to Petitioner’s case because (1) Petitioner’s statement was given to an investigator with the Richland County Sheriff’s Office and not a prosecuting attorney; and (2) Petitioner’s conversation with the investigator did not constitute plea negotiations. Consequently, the court held Petitioner failed to meet his burden of establishing a reasonable probability that the outcome of his direct appeal would have been different if trial counsel had properly preserved the argument for appeal.

On July 11, 2024, Petitioner filed a petition for rehearing with the Court of Appeals. By order filed August 15, 2024, the Court of Appeals denied rehearing.

This petition for writ of certiorari to the Court of Appeals follows.

⁴ Petitioner did not argue on appeal that his statements were inadmissible pursuant to Rule 410(4), SCRE, given the plain language of the rule. Rather, Petitioner argued the reasoning underlying Rule 410(4) was evidence of why any probative value of his alleged statements was substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice pursuant to Rule 403, SCRE.

ARGUMENT

The Court of Appeals erred by holding the PCR court correctly found Petitioner was not prejudiced by trial counsel's deficient performance where counsel failed to contemporaneously object to the admission of Petitioner's alleged statements to law enforcement in which Petitioner allegedly offered to plead guilty to a lesser offense after counsel moved pretrial to suppress the statements pursuant to Rule 403, SCRE, since there is a reasonable probability Petitioner would have prevailed on appeal had trial counsel properly preserved the issue.

While the PCR court correctly found trial counsel was deficient for failing to contemporaneously object to the admission of Petitioner's alleged statements offering to plead guilty to a lesser offense, the court erred by concluding Petitioner failed to prove prejudice. If counsel had properly preserved the argument that the probative value of Petitioner's statements offering to plead guilty was substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice, there is a reasonable probability Petitioner would have prevailed on appeal and the appellate court would have reversed his conviction. Respectfully, this Court should grant certiorari and hold the Court of Appeals erred by determining the PCR court correctly found Petitioner failed to prove prejudice.

In order to show ineffective assistance of counsel as a ground for relief, Petitioner must prove that "counsel's conduct so undermined the proper functioning of the adversarial process that the trial cannot be relied on as having produced a just result." Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668, 686 (1984); Butler v. State, 286 S.C. 441, 442, 334 S.E.2d 813, 814 (1985). The proper measure of performance is whether the attorney provided representation within the range of competence required in criminal cases. Strickland, 466 U.S. at 687-688.

A two pronged test is used in evaluating allegations of ineffective assistance of counsel. Petitioner must prove "that counsel's performance was deficient" and fell below reasonable

professional norms, and there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's unprofessional errors, the result would have been different. Cherry v. State, 300 S.C. 115, 117-118, 386 S.E.2d 624, 625 (1989) (citing Strickland, 466 U.S. at 688). "A reasonable probability is a probability sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome of the trial." Johnson v. State, 325 S.C. 182, 186, 480 S.E.2d 733, 735 (1997) (citing Strickland, 466 U.S. at 668).

This Court "has previously held that an issue that was raised on direct appeal but found to be unpreserved may be raised in the context of a PCR claim alleging ineffective assistance of counsel." McHam v. State, 404 S.C. 465, 475, 746 S.E.2d 41, 47 (2013) (citing McLaughlin v. State, 352 S.C. 476, 575 S.E.2d 841 (2003) and Foye v. State, 335 S.C. 586, 518 S.E.2d 265 (1999)). Consequently, the PCR court correctly found Petitioner's counsel was deficient for failing to renew her objection to the admission of Petitioner's statements when they were admitted. Since the issue was not considered on direct appeal because it was unpreserved, an examination of the merits of the issue is proper in analyzing the prejudice prong. See McHam, 404 S.C. at 475, 746 S.E.2d at 47; Sikes v. State, 323 S.C. 28, 30, 448 S.E.2d 560, 562 (1994).

Plea negotiations occur in almost every criminal case. They benefit both the defendant and the state. However, as occurred in Petitioner's case, there are occasions where a defendant chooses to invoke his constitutional right to a jury trial and require the state to prove his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt despite prior plea discussions. Generally, those prior plea negotiations are not admissible at the defendant's trial pursuant to Rule 410(4), SCRE, which prohibits the admission against an accused of "any statement made in the course of plea discussions with an attorney for the prosecuting authority which do not result in a plea of guilty or which result in a plea of guilty later withdrawn." However, even informal plea discussions that do not fall under the purview of Rule 410, SCRE, may still be excluded as unfairly prejudicial pursuant to Rule 403, SCRE.

In this case, Investigator Martin testified at the suppression hearing that Petitioner wanted to know if he could be charged with something less serious and wanted to enter a guilty plea. App. 63, l. 23 – 64, l. 1; App. 69, ll. 3-5. Trial counsel argued the statements regarding a plea were more prejudicial than probative and that the statements did not amount to confession. App. 79, ll. 14-16. She also noted that the alleged “offers” to plead guilty were made in response to Martin’s mischaracterizations of the evidence against Petitioner. Tr. 79, ll. 2-13. Nonetheless, the trial court ruled the statements were admissible. App. 99, ll. 13-14.

Before the jury, the state elicited testimony from Martin that Petitioner said: “he wanted to discuss a plea” (App. 219, ll. 3-5); “he wanted to plead guilty” (App. 219, ll. 10-12; App. 228, 19-21; App. 224, l. 24 – 225, l. 1); “he wanted to see if he could negotiate some kind of plea or get a plea negotiated on his behalf” (App. 219, l. 25 – 220, l. 2); and he “went back into trying to negotiate a plea and if I could offer him a plea or help him with a plea” (App. 227, ll. 10-12). The admission of these statements penalized Petitioner for even mentioning a plea when facing interrogation by an officer who was mischaracterizing the weight of the evidence against him and emphasizing the long potential sentence ahead. A policy of allowing such statements or inquiries to be used against a defendant offends the presumption of innocence and requirement that the state bear the burden of proving a defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

Petitioner’s alleged offer to plead guilty to a lesser offense did not amount to a confession. There are many strategic reasons that a defendant considers in determining whether to enter a plea or proceed to trial. “The defendant who opts to go to trial rather than negotiating a plea runs the risk of a harsher sentence than he would have received by pleading guilty.” State v. Brouwer, 346 S.C. 375, 391, 550 S.E.2d 915, 924 (Ct. App. 2001) (quoting United States v. Quejada-Zurique, 708 F.2d 857 (1st Cir. 1983)).

In Brady v. United States, 397 U.S. 742 (1970), the United States Supreme Court acknowledged: “For a defendant who sees slight possibility of acquittal, the advantages of pleading guilty and limiting the probable penalty are obvious—his exposure is reduced, the correctional processes can begin immediately, and the practical burdens of a trial are eliminated.” 397 U.S. at 751-752.

In United States v. Robertson, 582 F.2d 1356, 1365 (5th Cir. 1978), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals noted that “not every discussion between an accused and agents for the government is a plea negotiation.” However, the purpose of Rule 410 of the Federal Rules of Evidence, after which the South Carolina rule is modeled, is “to serve both as an incentive and as a prophylactic; the rule both encourages and protects a free plea dialogue between the accused and the government.” Id. at 1366. The court in Robertson held that in determining admissibility of statements purportedly made during plea negotiations, a court must determine “first, whether the accused exhibited an actual subjective expectation to negotiate a plea at the time of the discussion, and, second, whether the accused’s expectation was reasonable given the totality of the objective circumstances.” Id. (citations omitted).

Providing guidance as to how to employ this inquiry, the court in Robertson wrote:

The initial inquiry into the accused’s subjective state of mind must be made with care to distinguish between those discussions in which the accused was merely making an admission and those discussions in which the accused was seeking to negotiate a plea agreement. The trial court must appreciate the tenor of the conversation. **In those situations in which the accused’s subjective intent is clear and the objective circumstances show that a plea bargain expectation was reasonable, the inquiry may end. For example, if the accused unilaterally offers to “plead guilty,” or to “take the blame,” in exchange for a government concession, then the policy underlying Fed.R.Crim.P. 11(e)(6) and Fed.R.Evid. 410 is served only if the discussions are held inadmissible.** That is not to say that we require a preamble explicitly demarcating the beginning of plea discussions. Yet, when such a preamble is delivered, it cannot be ignored. Indeed, even when such nascent overtures are completely

ignored by the government, such express unilateral offers ought to be held inadmissible, if the context is consistent.

Id. at 1367 (internal citations and quotations marks omitted) (emphasis added).

Distinguishing between a defendant's offer of cooperation and an offer to plead guilty, the Second Circuit Court of Appeals wrote in United States v. Levy, 578 F.2d 896, 901 (2nd Cir. 1978) that "an offer by the defendant must, in some way, express the hope that a concession to reduce the punishment will come to pass. A silent hope, if uncommunicated, gives the officer or prosecutor no chance to reject a confession he did not seek." However, that must be balanced against the purpose of the inadmissibility of plea negotiations, which is "to encourage plea bargaining, a system thought by many, though others disagree, to be desirable." Id. Thus, the court in Levy held an "accused is required, at least, to make manifest his intention to seek a plea bargain before he takes the route of self-incrimination." Id.

Notably, the statements admitted during Petitioner's trial were not incriminating statements made in a vain effort to obtain a favorable plea agreement. Because the interview with Petitioner was not audio or video recorded, the content of Petitioner's alleged statements was evidenced from Martin's scant notes and his varying recollection. In essence, Martin testified that Petitioner made the statements "I want to discuss a plea" and "I want to plead guilty" and asked the questions "can I negotiate a plea" or "can someone negotiate a plea on behalf." App. 219, l. 3 – 220, l. 2; App. 224, l. 24 – 225, l. 1; App. 227, ll. 10-12; App. 228, 19-21.

Rule 403, SCRE, provides, "Although relevant, evidence may be excluded if its probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice, confusion of the issues, or misleading the jury, or by considerations of undue delay, waste of time, or needless presentation of cumulative evidence." The policy considerations in favor of plea agreements and common sense weigh in favor of the exclusion of Petitioner's alleged statements pursuant to Rule 403.

One of the few respects in which Martin's testimony was consistent was that Petitioner's statements regarding pleading guilty were coupled with his request to plead to something less serious because he understood he faced a potential life sentence. Therefore, Petitioner made clear that it was his desire to enter into plea negotiations. Martin testified that he then informed Petitioner he could not help him with any kind of plea and such negotiations would instead be between Petitioner's attorney and the solicitor assigned to the case. The idea that any statement regarding interest in a plea offer can be used against a defendant, even where no plea offer results and no accompanying incriminating information is provided, is contrary to the policy in favor of plea negotiations.

Here, Petitioner made no admission that he had been anywhere near the Chuck E. Cheese since attending a birthday party there in 2011 or 2012. App. 62, ll. 16-20; App. 63, ll. 1-5. He also did not admit to having ever worn a wig. App. 62, ll. 21-25. Though Petitioner inquired about what type of DNA evidence Martin was referring to, Martin never told Petitioner it was from skin cells on a red bandana found behind another establishment or that there were other contributors to the mixture of DNA found on the bandana. App. 217, ll. 17-20; App. 218, ll. 17-22. Based on the information Petitioner was given, namely that there was definitive DNA evidence against him and that he was facing life imprisonment, it is not difficult to understand why Petitioner would have inquired about the possibility of a plea or stated that he wanted to plead guilty to a lesser offense at the time of his interrogation despite being innocent of the attempted robbery. This does not amount to a confession nor is it evidence of a consciousness of guilt, unlike the Court of Appeals found. Consequently, the evidence had no probative value.

As is evident from the record, Petitioner ultimately did not accept a plea offer in this case and instead invoked his right to a jury trial. Nonetheless, the state wanted to use Petitioner's

inquiry regarding a plea offer and his alleged statement that he wanted to plead guilty against him at the trial where he had pled not guilty. Unquestionably, had the prosecutor been present during the interview, or formal negotiations had occurred between trial counsel and the solicitor, any discussion of a plea would have been inadmissible pursuant to Rule 410(4), SCRE. However, even if Petitioner's statements are not inadmissible under the express provisions of Rule 410, the Court must still engage in a Rule 403 analysis. App. 79, ll. 14-16.

Instructive in the analysis of probative value versus unfair prejudice is the purpose behind the provisions to Rule 410. In State v. Mathis, 287 S.C. 589, 592-593, 340 S.E.2d 538, 540-541 (1986), our Supreme Court held that "the highly prejudicial potential of" of a withdrawn guilty plea "mandates its exclusion for all purposes." See Rule 410(1), SCRE; Kercheval v. United States, 274 U.S. 220 (1927); United States v. Mitchell, 633 F.3d 997, 1003 (10th Cir. 2011). The Court in Mathis noted the reasons for exclusion of withdrawn guilty pleas articulated in other jurisdictions, including:

- (1) It is unfair to use the plea against the accused after he has been allowed to retract it.
- (2) Evidentiary use of a withdrawn plea denies the defendant the benefit of the presumption of innocence.
- (3) The public interest of encouraging settlement of criminal cases without necessity of trial favors permitting an accused to plead guilty to the offense charged without prejudicing his position if it is later withdrawn.
- (4) The privilege of withdrawal is illusory if evidence of the plea is allowed.
- (5) The highly prejudicial nature of a prior guilty plea may induce the jury to become reckless in its consideration of the other evidence, regardless of cautionary instructions.

287 S.C. at 591-592, 340 S.E.2d at 540 (internal citations omitted).

Similar reasoning counsels in favor of exclusion of the highly prejudicial statements inquiring about a plea offer or mentioning an intention to work out a guilty plea during an interrogation. A defendant has a constitutional right to trial by an impartial jury and is entitled to the presumption of innocence. U.S. Const. amend. VI; S.C. Const. Art. I, § 14; Coffin v. United

States, 156 U.S. 432 (1895). In adopting the rule excluding withdrawn guilty pleas, the Louisiana Supreme Court stated in State v. Joyner, 84 So.2d 462, 463 (La. 1955):

We think the majority view is sound and more consonant with our concept of the constitutional rights of an accused. Where the plea of guilty is withdrawn, the defendant stands for trial upon a plea of not guilty, and is entitled to all the safeguards and presumptions of innocence which the humanity of the law extends to an individual whose life or liberty is at stake. One such right is that he is presumed to be innocent until proved guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, and the state has the burden of proving that guilt.

Allowing statements that Petitioner allegedly intended to plead guilty or inquired about plea negotiations during his interrogation risks the same recklessness by the jury in its consideration of the other evidence. To the extent that such statements are less prejudicial than the actual entry of a guilty plea, the distinction is marginal. The solicitor certainly emphasized the alleged statements in her closing argument to the jury. Additionally, the public interest in encouraging settlement of criminal cases without necessity of trial similarly favors permitting an accused to discuss the possibility of pleading guilty to the offense charged without prejudicing his position if he instead chooses to go to trial.

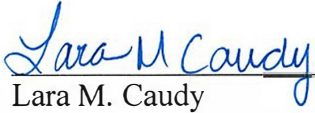
Consequently, the trial court abused its discretion by admitting Petitioner's alleged statements and inquiries regarding a plea offer because the probative value of such statements was substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice. Moreover, the admission of such statements is contrary to the overwhelming policy considerations that favor confidentiality of plea negotiations. Accordingly, if trial counsel had properly preserved her objection to the admission of Petitioner's statements, there is a reasonable probability the appellate court would have reversed Petitioner's conviction and remanded the case for a new trial.

Respectfully, this Court should grant certiorari and hold the PCR court erred by finding Petitioner failed to prove he was prejudiced by trial court's deficient performance.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing argument, Petitioner respectfully requests this Court grant the petition for writ of certiorari and order full briefing on the question presented.

Respectfully Submitted,


Lara M. Caudy
Senior Appellate Defender

ATTORNEY FOR PETITIONER

This 23rd day of September, 2024.