

'The only reason we are here today is because of Gil Geis'

He left a rich legacy of white-collar crime research

By Henry N. Pontell, Ph.D.

Gilbert Geis, Ph.D., CFE, who was known for his disciplined determination to develop a "life of the mind," had a long and distinguished history of contributions to social policy and practice as well as to criminological scholarship.

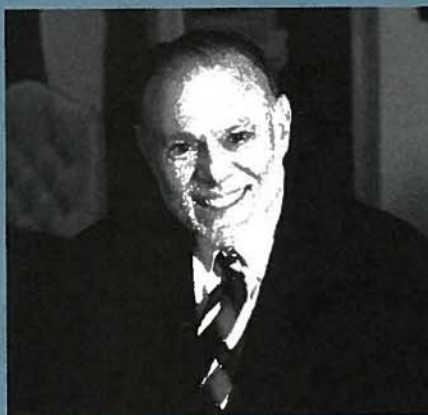
He was a member of Lyndon Johnson's President's Commission on Crime, and he was a past president of the American Society of Criminology, which presented him with its highest academic honor, the Edwin Sutherland Award. The National White-Collar Crime Research Consortium named its distinguished scholar award in his honor. More than a decade ago, colleagues contributed original pieces to a book in his honor. (See "Geis, Sutherland and white-collar crime," by Robert F. Meier, Ph.D., on page 36.)

Dr. Geis' work, which spanned eight decades, is notable for its superb interdisciplinary quality, quantity and remarkable breadth over a number of fields, including sociology, psychology, history, criminology, criminal justice, law, media studies, education and policy studies as well as many sub-disciplines. A partial list of topics includes education issues, race relations, Scandinavian studies, the death penalty, film censorship, prisons, prostitution, crime and crime victims, policing, community corrections, rehabilitation, organized crime, prisoner rights, rape, homicide, victimless crimes, legal ethics, drugs, violence, social problems, good Samaritans, compensation, restitution, deterrence, witch trials, criminal justice policy, research methods, the O.J. Simpson case, the UCI fertility clinic scandal, medical fraud and white-collar and corporate crime. It's this last area for which he became best known.

Heavy electrical equipment conspiracy

In 1967, Dr. Geis published what was to become a seminal study in criminology

— three decades after Edwin Sutherland's introduction of the concept of white-collar crime had passed without any serious additional research or fanfare. White-collar crime scandals were back on the criminological radar with



the publication of "The Heavy Electrical Equipment Antitrust Case of 1961" which appeared as an invited chapter in the book, "Criminal Behavior Systems: A Typology," edited by Marshall Clinard and Richard Quinney.

His single piece of scholarship helped spawn a new generation of researchers whose primary agenda was the study of white-collar and corporate crime. The importance of Dr. Geis' professional contribution to the interdisciplinary study of white-collar crime can't be overstated.

As Dr. Geis documented, the climate of ferocious competition that existed among large electrical equipment companies, including Westinghouse and General Electric, had led firms to conspire rather than compete in ruthless price wars that hurt profits. Instead of submitting competitive sealed bids for lucrative government contracts, executives began holding secret meetings at which they would agree in advance on prices and divide up the

contracts among their respective firms. The companies had effectively formed an illegal cartel — a flagrant violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act.

Dr. Geis found strong support for Sutherland's theory of differential association in the responses of executives to their offenses. The rationalizations used to justify their crimes strongly reflected attitudes learned within the corporate subcultures. Equally important, Dr. Geis' path-breaking work documented the vast inequalities in the criminal justice system when it came to the sanctioning of powerful defendants, which in this case included both individuals and companies.

Ultimately, fines totaling about \$2 million were handed out — mostly to GE and Westinghouse. Given the pecuniary magnitude of the crimes that cost billions of dollars over a number of years, the amount seems insignificant. Dr. Geis noted that a \$400,000 fine levied at General Electric would be equivalent to a man earning \$175,000 a year receiving a \$3 parking ticket (Geis, 1967).

The profound impact of Dr. Geis' work was shown in a remark made some 30 years ago by former Yale sociologist Stanton Wheeler, who told his law school students on the first day of their white-collar crime seminar, "The only reason we are here today is because of Gil Geis."

Other major work on white-collar crime

After Dr. Geis' initial foray into the topic, he didn't return to the subject of white-collar crime for five years. He wrote on other issues in crime and criminal justice, including victim compensation and victimization, female offenders, drugs, victimless crimes and rape.

He resumed his work on corporate crime in 1972, focusing on punishment, and in the following year published the first major criminological piece on the deterrence of corporate crime (Geis, 1973) in a book co-edited by Ralph Nader. This was followed by collaborative work with Herbert Edelhertz, a lawyer and applied social scientist, on criminal law and consumer crimes and an overview piece on white-collar crime published in a leading criminological text (Geis, 1974).

In the late 1970s, Dr. Geis began to concentrate his work in the areas of white-collar and corporate law breaking. Among other topics, he published on corporate violence, the white-collar offender and fraud against the elderly, and he produced a classic reader on white-collar crime with Robert Meier, which was updated with Lawrence Salinger in 1995 (Geis, Meier and Salinger, 1995).

In the early 1980s, he collaborated with John Braithwaite on a classic piece, "On Theory and Action for Corporate Crime Control" (Braithwaite and Geis, 1982). The paper suggested that corporate crime is a more feasible and significant crime control target than traditional crime and argued that the discredited doctrines of crime control by public disgrace, deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation can be successfully applied to corporate crime.

That same year he published a major treatise on white-collar crime (Geis, 1982) and the first in a series of a dozen articles and chapters on medical fraud emanating from a study funded by the National Institute of Justice on which he collaborated with Henry Pontell and Paul Jesilow (Pontell, Jesilow and Geis, 1982). That work culminated in the publication of the book, "Prescription for Profit: How Doctors Defraud Medicaid" (Jesilow, Pontell and Geis, 1993).

In 1983, Geis collaborated with Colin Goff on the now-classic introduction to the "uncut version" of Sutherland's book, "White-Collar Crime," published by Yale University Press (Geis and Goff, 1983). Among his numerous books and articles since are a major study with Mary Dodge, Ph.D., of the crimes committed at the University of California - Irvine medical school's fertility clinic, "Stealing Dreams: A Fertility Clinic Scandal" (Geis and Dodge, 2003); an historical and analytical overview in "White-Collar and Corporate Crime" (Geis, 2007), which will soon be reissued by Oxford University Press; and edited volumes, including a special issue of "Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science," (Jesilow and Geis, 1993), and "International Handbook of White-Collar and Corporate Crime" (Pontell and Geis, 2007). His last book was "White-Collar and Corporate Crime: A Documentary and Reference Guide" (2011).

Gilbert Geis was a giant in the study of white-collar crime and fraud prevention whose keen sense of justice and humanity was evident in everything he wrote. He was also an ideal mentor and beloved colleague to so many. While we'll miss him deeply, his intellectual legacy will continue to guide scholars and practitioners for years to come.

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Member plants tree in Dr. Geis' honor

Thomas Stazyk, CFE, CISA, CPA, and his wife, Mahruku, recently planted Kahikatea trees in honor of Gil Geis, Ph.D., CFE, on the Stazyks' New Zealand preservation farm, CUE Haven.

The Kahikatea, the tallest New Zealand native tree with

heights up to 200 feet, lives for hundreds of years.

CUE Haven (short for Cultivating Understanding and Enlightenment) is 59 acres in Araparera, an hour north of Auckland. The Stazyks are converting the former cattle

farm back to native forests and wetlands.

The Stazyks previously planted Kahikatea trees in honor of Dr. Donald R. Cressey, another ACFE pillar, and his wife, Elaine.

For more information on CUE Haven, visit cuehaven.com.



Thomas Stazyk, CFE, CISA, CPA, plants a Kahikatea tree in honor of Gil Geis, Ph.D., CFE.