

Acquittal in opioid overdose murder trial

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Geoffrey Walter Uhall

Leonardtown, MD- A St. Mary's County jury deliberated for five hours before deciding the case against a Leonardtown man charged with second-degree depraved heart murder.

Geoffrey Walter Uhall, 30, was charged in connection with the death of Colleen Cord, 58, of Lexington Park. (Pictured right)

The jury of seven women and five men found Uhall guilty of controlled dangerous substance (CDS) distribution and CDS possession. Uhall was acquitted on the charges of second-degree depraved heart murder, involuntary manslaughter and reckless endangerment.

James Farmer, Uhall's attorney, spoke with TheBayNet.com after the trial. "The jury made the right decision in determining that Geoffrey Uhall was in no way responsible for the death of Colleen Cord. With all due respect to her, the decisions she made throughout her entire life to abuse illicit drugs for the past 45 years should not be placed on the shoulders of Mr. Uhall. The family is happy."

This was the fifth depraved heart murder trial for St. Mary's County State's Attorney Richard Fritz since announcing indictments against eight individuals who were suspected of dealing drugs that led to fatal overdoses.

While Fritz has yet to successfully convict any suspect on second-degree depraved heart murder, he said he doesn't see that as a failure. "Although we didn't get convictions on all of the charges, it's still more than what we were doing before we started charging the suspects." Fritz also noted the county's attempt to not ignore the growing opioid epidemic. "Before, these cases were just treated as tragic overdoses, so if we get any conviction, we've done something."

Fritz went on to say he's not discouraged by the decisions of the juries and plans to prosecute similar cases. "We present the evidence and the jury makes the decision. In the future, we can continue to move forward with these cases and it's up to the juries to decide."

During the opening arguments of the trial, Fritz named the alleged dealer who Uhall said he purchased the heroin from for himself and Cord. TheBayNet.com asked Fritz why that person was not charged. "The narcotics detectives might be looking into him but that's something you should address with the sheriff's office," said Fritz.

Some residents of St. Mary's County called these eight indictments a "political stunt" by Fritz. Fritz responded, "Political stunt? It's not something I even fathom. I'm doing my job under the Constitution of the United States and the State of Maryland. These people commit crimes, they need to be prosecuted. We're doing what few state's attorneys' offices are doing and I think it's important that we continue. More states are starting to get on board with prosecuting overdose deaths."

Fritz said he feels he has unfinished business. "I'm running one more time and I'm done after this next term. When I first started [as state's attorney] crack cocaine was running rampant in this county. Now it's heroin and I'm not ready to retire yet."

Fritz also applauded the efforts of law enforcement. "I think it's a heroic effort—and if you go into the drug community and ask what's going on, the word on the street is, 'if you deal Fentanyl, Carfentanil or heroin and someone dies, you will be prosecuted.' It's having an impact on the street."

Assistant State's Attorney Jaymi Sterling echoed the sentiment. "We have won all of the legal arguments—motions for dismissals and acquittals. If these cases didn't have any merit, we couldn't prosecute."

Farmer agreed the efforts to combat the opioid epidemic is justified. "Is it possible for a dealer to be guilty of second-degree murder? I would say yes. The circumstances would have to be a person who distributed a drug with knowledge or reckless disregard by cutting it with Fentanyl or Carfentanil and that causes the death."

Farmer still argued personal accountability. "There should be an assumption of risk if someone is using illegal substances and mixing it with other drugs. In this case, Cord died from a combination of cocaine, Fentanyl, heroin and Tramadol. The Tramadol was nearly three times the therapeutic levels."

Judge David W. Densford granted permission for Uhall to remain out of jail until sentencing, at which time he faces up to 20 years in prison for the distribution charge. A sentencing date has not been set.

Contact Joy Shrum at j.shrum@thebaynet.com

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