

NEWS RELEASE

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8 defendants plead guilty in homicide cases

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Today, the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Homicide Team convicted eight defendants in homicide cases. The defendants entered their guilty pleas in Mecklenburg County Superior Court before The Honorable W. Robert Bell, Superior Court Judge.

Damien Wright, 17, pled guilty to second-degree murder for the death of Khalil Malik Cousart, 13. Wright was sentenced to 120-156 months in prison. In August 2012, Wright was walking Khalil home when they saw a vehicle approaching them near the intersection of Tuckaseegee Road and Parkway Avenue in Charlotte. Hours earlier, Wright and Khalil were among a group of individuals who exchanged words with the driver of a white car. Believing the approaching vehicle to be the same white car, Wright began shooting at the vehicle. Wright looked away as he shot, and unbeknownst to him, Khalil moved into the line of fire. Khalil was shot once and died at an area hospital.

James Cleveland, 27, pled guilty to second-degree murder for the September 2011 murder of Demytre Pendleton, 2. Cleveland was sentenced to 156-197 months in prison. The charges against a co-defendant in the case, Ariacna Romero, are still pending.

Shannon Merriman, 24, pled guilty to second-degree murder for the death of her 21-month-old son, Marcus Davis, Jr. Merriman was sentenced to 110-141 months in prison. In July 2011, the child underwent emergency surgery for a brain injury and died days later as a result of those injuries. Merriman initially told police that Marcus slipped on the wet kitchen floor and hit his head, but she later admitted that she shook him and pushed him down to the floor, hitting his head on the stove.

Steven Driggers, 21, pled guilty to felony death by motor vehicle for the death of Reinaldo Montejo Rodriguez, 55. Driggers was sentenced to 24-41 months in prison. In June 2012, Driggers was driving on Reedy Creek Road in Charlotte when he crossed the double yellow line and struck Mr. Rodriguez's vehicle head on. Mr. Rodriguez died on the way to the hospital. His wife and teenage daughter, who were also in the car, suffered non-life-threatening injuries. Driggers admitted to police that he'd been drinking beer and smoking marijuana, and police determined that Driggers was driving at least 81 mph in a 45-mph zone.

James Andrews, 19, pled guilty to 1) robbery with a dangerous weapon and 2) conspiracy to commit robbery with a dangerous weapon in connection with the killing of Caleb Copenhaver, 20. Andrews was sentenced to 48-67 months in prison. In August 2011, a witness and the victim arranged to meet up to purchase marijuana from someone known as "P." When Mr. Copenhaver and the witness arrived at the designated location, they were met by two men

identified as Andrews and Cornell Blackwell. The witness spoke to "P," who was later identified as Campton Wolfe, on the phone, and he said he was on his way. The witness and Mr. Copenhaver then walked into a vacant house with Andrews and Blackwell, but Mr. Copenhaver decided he wanted to leave. As Mr. Copenhaver walked away, Blackwell pushed him to the ground and shot him. Mr. Copenhaver's wallet was taken, and he died later at an area hospital. Andrews' co-defendants, Blackwell and Wolfe, have previously pled guilty in connection with the murder.

Stephen Watts, 52, pled guilty to 1) misdemeanor death by vehicle and 2) driving while impaired in the death of Autumn Soyka, 31. Watts was sentenced to 60 days in the Mecklenburg County jail for the misdemeanor death by vehicle offense. For the DWI offense, he was sentenced to 12 months in prison; that sentence was suspended for 24 months of supervised probation. As a condition of his probation, he must serve 7 days in the Mecklenburg County jail and be placed on electronic house arrest for 4 months after he is released from custody. In October 2011, Watts was driving on East 7th Street in Charlotte when Ms. Soyka, who was crossing the street, stepped in front of Watts' vehicle. Police found that Watts was not speeding at the time of the crash but that he was driving under the influence of alcohol.

Marcis Turner, 38, pled guilty to voluntary manslaughter for the death of Derrick Lee Miller, 41. Turner was sentenced to 51-74 months in prison. In September 2012, Turner became concerned when his wife did not return home at the expected time. Turner and a friend went looking for his wife using a cell phone app that showed the location of her phone. When they arrived on Northpark Boulevard in Charlotte, Turner discovered his wife in a parked vehicle with Mr. Miller. Turner became enraged and fatally shot Mr. Miller.

Shamon Goins, 22, pled guilty to accessory after the fact of discharging a weapon into an occupied conveyance in operation in connection with the 2008 murders of Kevin Cano, 20, and Jamie Gill, 20. Goins was sentenced to 21-26 months in prison; that sentence was suspended for 36 months of supervised probation. As a condition of his probation, he must serve 135 days in the Mecklenburg County jail. Charges against a co-defendant in this case are still pending.

Jacob Leon Case, 20, previously pled guilty to 1) robbery with a dangerous weapon and 2) conspiracy to commit robbery with a dangerous weapon in connection with the January 2010 murder of Jared Bolli, 25. Today, he was sentenced to 64-86 months in prison. Charges against a co-defendant in the case are still pending.

Note: Almost all guilty pleas entered in criminal administrative court are the result of an agreed upon plea arrangement between the State and the defendant, which is then approved by the sentencing judge. For more information about why most cases must be resolved by plea negotiation instead of jury trial, please visit the "Understanding Criminal Court" section of the DA's website at www.charmeckda.com.

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