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III
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NEWS RELEASE

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Two men sentenced to life in prison for murder of Charlotte woman

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Today, Lavi Pham and James Salerno were both sentenced to life in prison after a jury found them guilty of the March 2020 murder of 20-year-old Mary Collins. The DA's Homicide Team prosecuted the case. The trial, which began on September 14, 2026, and concluded with today's verdict, was held in courtroom 5370 before the Honorable Karen Eady-Williams, Superior Court Judge.

Lavi Pham, 27, was tried for 1) first-degree murder, 2) first-degree kidnapping, and 3) concealment of death. The jury found him *guilty as charged*. Judge Eady-Williams sentenced Pham to life in prison without the possibility of parole for the murder charge. For the kidnapping charge he received a consecutive sentence of 73-100 months in prison, and for the remaining charge he received a consecutive sentence of 64-89 months in prison.

James Salerno, 26, was tried for 1) first-degree murder, 2) first-degree kidnapping, 3) concealment of death, and 4) accessory after the fact to first-degree murder. The jury found him *guilty* of the first three charges. Due to the guilty verdict for first-degree murder, the accessory after the fact charge was dismissed by the Court. For the murder charge, Judge Eady-Williams sentenced Salerno to life in prison without the possibility of parole. For the kidnapping charge he received a consecutive sentence of 73-100 months in prison, and for the remaining charge he received a consecutive sentence of 64-89 months in prison.

Testimony during the trial established that on March 28, 2020, Mary Collins, the victim, was picked up by a rideshare that was ordered for her by Kelly Lavery. Collins went to the NoDa apartment of Lavery and Lavi Pham to hang out. Collins had previously been in a dating relationship with Pham, and he and Lavery planned to persuade Collins to join them in sexual activity. According to testimony, the group hung out that evening and engaged in drug use. Pham and Lavery drugged Mary in an attempt to make her comfortable with engaging in sexual activity. The group continued to hang out into March 29. James Salerno arrived in the early morning hours of March 29, and America Diehl arrived later that day. Lavery and Pham continued to drug Mary and tried to persuade her to engage in sexual activity with them. Around midnight, Diehl went to sleep in a spare bedroom while the others continued to hang out. She woke up and left around 7:00 a.m. At some point overnight, after Collins refused to participate in any sexual activity with Lavery and Pham, Lavery struck her over the head with a large glass liquor bottle in the primary bedroom. Pham and Salerno then moved Collins into the primary bathroom. They put her in the tub where Lavery, Pham, and Salerno cut and stabbed her over 130 times. Collins succumbed to her injuries.

Courtroom testimony established that after Collins passed away, Salerno left to pick up Diehl and brought her back to the apartment and Pham, Salerno, and Diehl cleaned the bathroom. Pham and Salerno then removed the box springs from inside the primary bedroom mattress, wrapped Collins' body tightly in plastic wrap, put her body in garbage bags, wrapped her up in multiple layers of duct tape, and put her body inside the mattress. They tried to maintain the shape of the mattress by filling it with miscellaneous items, including body wash and sliced open detergent pods to mask the odor. Then they retaped the edges and covered the mattress with bedding.

Between April 2 and April 4, detectives with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department received information from a witness who had spoken with both Salerno and Diehl. Salerno had told this witness that he was at a party where Collins had been tied up and beaten in a bathtub and then later, her body was hidden in a mattress that they were trying to dispose of. That same witness gave more information that ultimately led to a search warrant for the apartment.

Detectives executed that search warrant on April 4 and discovered Collins' wrapped body inside the mattress in the primary bedroom. Pham and Lavery were arrested on scene. Detectives also recovered multiple knives, some with suspected blood on them. Detectives also located suspected blood on the bathroom floor and bathtub wall, as well as on the shower curtain and liner. They also observed signs of clean-up. Bluestar, a blood detection reagent used by crime scene investigators, showed the presence of blood throughout the bathroom. There were also several rolls of duct tape and contractor grade trash bags located throughout the apartment. The springs that had been removed from the mattress were recovered in a dumpster near the apartment. Cell phone data showed Pham and Lavery discussing drugging Collins in order to persuade her to engage in sexual activity. They also showed Pham and Salerno discussing the clean-up of the scene.

Charges against America Diehl remain pending. Kelly Lavery previously pled guilty to charges related to this crime.

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