

Watch Now: Amherst County man gets 25 years in 2019 murder, shooting

Justin Faulconer
Feb 17, 2022

AMHERST — An Amherst County man was sentenced to 25 years Thursday for second-degree murder and aggravated malicious wounding in the November 2019 shooting death of his neighbor and wounding of a friend.

Carson Grey Candler, 20, told Amherst County Circuit Judge Michael Garrett before sentencing the deceased victim, 43-year-old Justin Andrew Samuels, was like a father to him. Candler also pleaded guilty in October to severely wounding Blakeman “Bru” Norconk during a dispute outside the defendant’s home on Canodys Store Road.

Candler, who according to testimony and evidence was a troubled teen dealing with mental health issues, accompanied Samuels on a hunting trip earlier in the day and was at a get-together with the two victims.

Norconk testified Candler, who was showing “outrageous” behavior that night, was asked to leave the oyster roast, and he and Samuels drove Candler to his house and kept a pistol from him, which angered him. Candler went back into his home, found a hidden handgun and shot the two men when he came back outside, Norconk and Christine Samuels, the widow of Justin Samuels, each testified.

Christine Samuels testified she heard gunshots when Candler came out of the house and she frantically called 911; she could be heard sobbing during the call prosecutors played in court. She said her husband “was such a big presence” who was loved by many in the community and she suffers post-traumatic stress from the incident.

She said she’s not the same person she was before the night of Nov. 16, 2019, when her husband died from three gunshots.

“Part of me died that night with Justin and I’ll never get that back,” Christine Samuels said.

Justin Samuels wanted to be there for Candler like a mentor he had had in his own life, she said.

Norconk was shot twice and testified to crawling to his truck to call 911 and feared losing his life. He was hospitalized until Christmas Eve of that year, had multiple surgeries and suffers from permanent nerve damage, he testified.

As a Marine, he said, he’s been trained for such scenarios and described getting shot as “a very surreal moment.”

“You never really think it’s going to happen, nor it’s going to happen in your best friend’s yard, a sanctuary,” Norconk said.

He said he still has a heavy burden from that night and not seeing more clearly the events unfolding that led to Samuels' murder and his severe injuries.

Austin Candler, the defendant's brother, testified their father died in 2018 and Carson Candler was dealing with a range of issues. After the shooting, the defendant called him to apologize, he said.

"I could tell he was not there. He was mentally out of it," Austin Candler testified of the call. "He was not himself that night."

He said the Candler family lost someone as well and "not a day goes by that I don't miss my brother."

Their mother, Kim Candler, broke down in tears at several points testifying Thursday of her younger son's litany of mental health issues. She said the family was in crisis mode and Justin Samuels was a positive role model in her son's life.

A few days before the incident, a close friend of Carson Candler died suddenly and it caused him severe emotional distress, Kim Candler testified. She said the two victims did the right thing trying to keep the gun away from her son that night and she never thought he would hurt someone else when he came out and started shooting.

"I ran because I didn't want to get shot," she testified through tears.

She testified her son held the gun to his head and she pleaded with him not to kill himself. She said he told her, "Mom, I love you. What happened?" He waited at the home for authorities to arrive.

Kim Candler said she later moved because she didn't want Christine Samuels to see her every day.

She lamented the experiences she had in trying to get mental health treatment for her son and believes with a better response and more affordable avenues the shooting could have been prevented.

"I do not want another family to go through what we had to," Kim Candler said, adding of the state's response to her son's issues: "It is ridiculous in Virginia."

Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney Amber Drumheller, who first met the Samuels family the night of the murder in the course of responding to the scene, said she has grown close to the victims and their loved ones. She criticized sentencing guidelines that called for a high end of nearly 21 years in prison.

"I thought the guidelines were pretty close to garbage, in my opinion," Drumheller said in court.

She argued for the maximum of life in prison plus 43 years.

"Carson took their hope for a future with Justin," Drumheller said. "He stole him from them on the night of Nov. 16, 2019, and he stole Bru's life too."

Chuck Felmlee, Candler's attorney, said the case is among the saddest he's ever been involved in during 20-plus years as a lawyer, serving as both a Lynchburg prosecutor and as a defense attorney.

He said Carson Candler had no previous criminal history except for a speeding ticket and has been remorseful and taken full responsibility. The defendant spoke affectionately of Justin Samuels when immediately questioned by investigators that night, Felmlee said.

“These are not the words of a stone-cold killer the commonwealth wants you to believe,” Felmlee said to Garrett. “Quite simply, Carson Candler loved Justin Samuels.”

Felmlee said his client was at an “unbearable low” that night after the death of his friend, was extremely depressed and intoxicated from drugs and alcohol. He added if the defendant was sober and taking his medications, the incident likely would not have happened.

The shooting was not “born out of evil” but rather a mental health crisis for his client that wasn’t dealt with properly.

Commonwealth’s Attorney Lyle Carver said Carson Candler, by the defense’s own evidence, showed no remorse for shooting Norconk. He said positive strides the defendant has made have come since he was incarcerated and argued the public won’t be properly protected when he is released.

“We want the court to not forget either of the victims with this sentence,” Carver told Garrett. “This was the defendant’s choice. Our community was changed, a man was murdered and Bru Norconk will never be the same.”

The judge sentenced Candler to 83 years and suspended 58 years, leaving an active sentence of 25 years. He also ordered restitution of more than \$17,500 and ordered credit for time served, or two years and three months.

Garrett said the victim impact statements were gut-wrenching; a lot of residents lost a friend and supporter of the community, and no sentence he imposes would change it.

“This is a devastating case for everybody,” Garrett said. “Everyone is forever going to be impacted by that horrible night.”

Before he was sentenced, Carson Candler apologized to the victims and their families and his own loved ones for the “immeasurable pain” he thinks about each day. He thanked Christine Samuels for the time she let her husband spend with him, teaching him to hunt, use tools and other life skills.

He said he failed to be like the man he loves the most and there is no logical explanation for his committing the murder. The defendant added if he had been sober and medicated it would not have happened.

Carson Candler said he will strive to treat others the way Justin Samuels treated him.

“I promise you I’ll do everything I can to be like Justin Samuels,” he told the judge.

bedford county circuit court

Gang member sentenced to 75 years for role in teen's murder in Bedford County

Justin Faulconer

Mar 15, 2022



Lisandro Antonio Posada-Vasquez, 28, sits in the courtroom for his plea hearing Tuesday in Bedford County Circuit Court regarding his involvement in the murder of Lynchburg teen Raymond Wood.

Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

BEDFORD — An MS-13 gang member who pleaded guilty to his role in the March 2017 slaying of a Lynchburg teenager in Bedford County was sentenced Tuesday to 75 years in prison.

Lisandro Antonio Posada-Vasquez, 28, is among a group of gang members involved in the brutal murder of Raymond Wood, 17. Posada-Vasquez in September 2018 pleaded guilty to capital murder, but because of changes in state law abolishing the death penalty he entered a guilty plea Tuesday to an amended charge of aggravated murder.

He also was convicted of abduction for a financial benefit and gang participation. A robbery charge against him was dropped Tuesday at his sentencing hearing in Bedford County Circuit Court.

Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance has said Posada-Vasquez was among those in the group who directly inflicted fatal wounds on Wood that night. Wood, who sold marijuana and according to prosecutors was seen by the gang as a rival, was abducted from his front lawn in Lynchburg and driven to a rural Bedford County road, where he was choked unconscious and stabbed repeatedly.

Posada-Vasquez was one of four gang members sent to the Lynchburg area and at the time was living in Montgomery County, Maryland, Nance has said. The gang set up a fake marijuana deal to lure Wood out of his home and drove him to Roaring Run

Road in Bedford County, according to prosecutors' evidence. A passing driver came across the scene of Wood's murder and Posada-Vasquez was one of several assailants to flee the area into the woods, Nance has said.

The defendant was arrested with others after a vehicle stop in Forest the morning after Wood's murder, which prompted a large investigation that crossed state and national borders and marked the first time Central Virginia had seen such a gruesome crime attributed to the MS-13 gang.

A knife more than 10 inches long was the murder weapon; it was buried shortly after the killing and recovered by investigators in June 2018, according to evidence. Four others aside from Posada-Vasquez have been charged or convicted in connection with killing Wood.

Amy Tharp, a state medical examiner who conducted Wood's autopsy, has testified the cause of death was sharp force injuries to the neck, torso and right arm, and Wood had rapid blood loss.

Judge James Updike sentenced Posada-Vasquez to life in prison on the combined charges, which is suspended after 75 years, and credited him with time served since his 2017 arrest. The horrific crime calls for a lengthy prison sentence, Nance said.

"It's one more defendant that has finally gotten to a day of justice for Raymond Wood and his family," Nance said. "We're very satisfied with that."

He said three jury trials for co-defendants have put the Wood family through a lot and Posada-Vasquez was the first to plead guilty and take responsibility for his actions.

Kevin Josue Soto Bonilla was found guilty of capital murder and received a life sentence in December 2019. Victor Arnaldo Rodas was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to 55 years in February 2019 in connection with Wood's killing.

The sentencing for Josue Moises Coreas-Ventura, who last month was convicted by a jury for aggravated murder in commission of abduction for financial benefit, is set for October. Another co-defendant, Cristian Sanchez Gomez, awaits trial on charges of murder, robbery and abduction for financial benefit.

"So one more hurdle has been cleared, but there is still several to go," Nance said.

Pregnant woman's slaying in Lynchburg leads to 45-year sentence for Appomattox man

Justin Faulconer

May 18, 2022



Melanie Hill holds a photo outside Lynchburg Circuit Court of her daughter, Cansas Crotts, who was shot dead in September 2020 by Kevin O'Neal Allen in Lynchburg. Allen, who claimed it was accidental, was sentenced to 45 years for second-degree murder and other charges.

Justin Faulconer

An Appomattox man convicted of killing his pregnant girlfriend in a September 2020 shooting in Lynchburg was sentenced Wednesday to 45 years in prison.

Kevin O'Neal Allen, 37, was arrested after Cansas Carolyn Crotts, 25, was found dead with a single gunshot wound to her head in a bedroom in the 2100 block of Pocahontas Street.

Allen pleaded guilty in February to one count each of second-degree murder, discharging a firearm in an occupied dwelling, use of a firearm in commission of a felony and two counts of felony child endangerment.

Allen testified at his sentencing hearing Wednesday in Lynchburg Circuit Court the shooting was accidental. He said he, Crotts and their two young children were in the room that night when he heard a loud bang and he retrieved a firearm in the room when it accidentally discharged and shot her.

"I loved Cansas more than anything," Allen testified.

When asked by his attorney, Matthew Pack, if he intentionally killed her, he replied "No I didn't."

Pack asked Allen why he pleaded guilty to the charges if it was an accident.

"I just wanted the family to get through this," Allen said of avoiding a trial that would be traumatic for family members.

According to Allen's testimony, he had two guns in the room that night because he prepared in case of a potential breach of the home from a person who lived nearby against whom Crotts had a protective order. The gun went off as he was getting out of the bed and he frantically called 911, he testified.

Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney Andrew Childress questioned Allen about procedures for firearm safety and how the incident unfolded in the bedroom. Allen served three years in the U.S. Army, and Childress said the defendant, who had extensive training on firearms, essentially broke every gun safety rule if the shooting was accidental as he claimed.

Childress said the slaying was a "selfish, cruel" and intentional act in front of two small children and evidence did not show it was accidental. Allen previously threatened the victim and carried through with it, Childress said.

"Mr. Allen said he was going to kill Cansas twice that day before he did," Childress said. "This was not an accident ... that act has consequences, regardless of how the perpetrator feels about it."

Pack said Allen accepts responsibility for the tragic event and didn't want to put his two children through a trial as possible witnesses.

Crotts, the mother of two other children apart from Allen's, was nearly two months pregnant at the time of her death.

Her father, Jackie Crotts, testified the family marked what would have been her 27th birthday on May 14 and how Allen's "heinous act" has negatively affected them.

"The impact on my household and marriage is unimaginable ... his selfish act has changed lives forever," he testified.

Melanie Hill, Crotts' mother, said she has grandchildren in turmoil and lamented never hearing her daughter say "Mom, I love you again."

"It broke my heart," Hill said through tears.

Allen apologized before sentencing and again insisted it was an accident.

Judge F. Patrick Yeatts said Allen as a gun enthusiast and Army veteran knows that guns don't shoot themselves and his explanation of the crime defies the evidence, logic and common sense.

"Simply put, I don't believe your version," Yeatts told Allen.

The judge said multiple individuals observed Allen's threats to the victim and have no reason to make that up.

"I believe you committed a violent, intentional act against Miss Crotts," Yeatts told Allen. "Simply put, you made good on a promise."

Allen was given credit for time served since his arrest to go toward the sentence and is court-ordered to have no contact with Crotts' family members.

After the hearing, Hill said her daughter was funny, "always picking and joking," outgoing and free-spirited.

“She was my Mother’s Day present the year she was born,” Hill said with a smile.

The last message she received from Cansas Crotts said she feared Allen would murder her, Hill said.

“I feel like there’s some justice,” Hill said of the 45-year sentence. “This should have never happened.”