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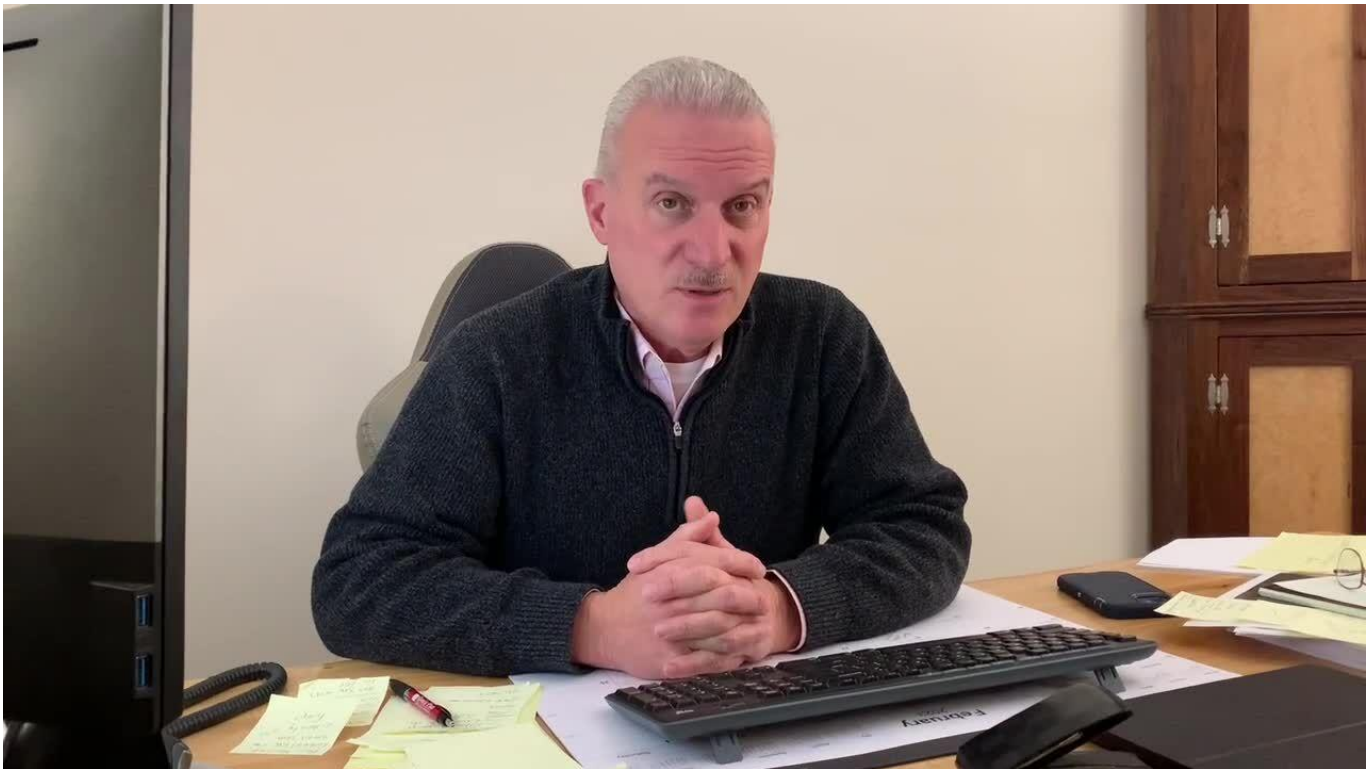
ALERT TOP STORY

amherst county

Ayers calls handling of 2019 Amherst homicide case 'colossal failure', prosecutor responds

Justin Faulconer

Feb 1, 2023



An Amherst County supervisor who formerly served as the county's sheriff took to social media this week to criticize what he called a "serious injustice" in how a 2019 homicide and wounding case was handled.

In a post Monday on his personal Facebook page, Supervisor Jimmy Ayers shared his thoughts at length regarding the June 2019 slaying of Doris Puleio and wounding of her daughter. In a subsequent interview, Ayers said he made his comments as a

citizen, not as a county supervisor. Justin Jay Sales, who at the time lived in Amherst, was arrested in July 2019 and accused of first-degree murder, aggravated malicious wounding and two counts of using a firearm in commission of a felony in connection with the shooting death of Puleio, 92, and wounding of Trudy Ann Goetz, 74. Puleio was found dead in her home on Bobwhite Road in Amherst with gunshot wounds to her torso and left arm, while Goetz suffered two piercing gunshot wounds to the torso and one that grazed her chest, prosecutors have said.



Ayers

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At a Dec. 8, 2021, hearing in Amherst Circuit Court, Commonwealth's Attorney Lyle Carver moved to drop the charges, citing multiple evidentiary issues, among them a chain-of-custody matter, a cyberattack that affected body camera footage and the illness of a key witness. After the hearing, Sales was released from custody; he had been in jail two and a half years awaiting trial.

In his Facebook post, Ayers said he was “appalled” by information in the case. He wrote of the handgun recovered and how a search warrant states an Amherst County Sheriff’s Office investigator attested it was the only item taken from a Madison Heights residence. A search warrant filed in Amherst Circuit Court in July 2019 shows a Glock .22 pistol was recovered from a house on Thacker Lane.

“It appears there was no documentation from any officer taking responsibility for the removal of the weapon which was recovered,” wrote Ayers, who served as Amherst County sheriff from 1995 to 2015 and has been on the county’s board of supervisors since 2016.

Ayers wrote the true issue in the charges being dropped is a lack of documentation in the search warrant as to who removed the weapon from the scene and transported it to the sheriff’s office.

His post added he felt compelled to share the information with the Amherst community.

“I find it hard to believe that a police officer would remove this item, a piece of evidence that would surely be the focal point of the trial, and never document it,” Ayers wrote.

He further wrote it is hard to understand how that same investigator could execute the search warrant, swear under oath to the circuit court clerk that it was the only item recovered from the search, and then have no knowledge of who or how the weapon the investigator inventoried on the search warrant was recovered.

Two phone calls to Amherst County Sheriff E.W. Viar, who took office in January 2016 after Ayers’ retirement; a call to Major E.W. Elliott, the media contact for the Amherst County Sheriff’s Office; and an email to both seeking comment were not returned as of publication time.

Carver, the lead prosecutor, criticized Ayers’ remarks in a statement Monday.

“I wasn’t elected to grandstand on Facebook so it’s disappointing that this other public official chose to,” said Carver, who has served as Amherst County’s chief prosecutor since mid-2015 and has worked in the office for 15 years. “The post shows a lack of understanding and/or a blatant disregard for the law, ethics, and criminal procedure. The post is selfish, inaccurate and misleading.”

When asked about Ayers’ statement on the lack of documentation of the handgun, Carver said because of professional ethics and an ongoing investigation he can’t comment on that.

“The request for transparency at this point would violate my code of ethics,” Carver wrote. “I understand the community wants answers and feels entitled to them.”

In an interview Wednesday, Ayers said he wrote the post after speaking with the surviving victim and her family and reviewing the search warrant. He said for a case of such magnitude — in which a 92-year-old was killed sitting in her bedroom, her daughter was shot in the next room and the suspect was released — the outcome is “appalling.”

He said “the job was not done in Amherst County” and the charges being dropped isn’t acceptable.

“I’m not going to sit down on this,” Ayers said. “It bothers me.”



Carver

He said “basically sloppy police work was condoned and allowed to happen and then created a situation where this family had no closure.”

Ayers said the prosecution’s statement in court during the Dec. 8, 2021, hearing of a key witness being too sick to testify was not correct. That witness, a sheriff’s deputy, was never communicated with about testifying and is no longer with the department, according to Ayers. Reached by phone Wednesday, that former deputy confirmed Ayers’ statement about not being contacted about the charges being dropped and his availability to testify.

“The community has been misled in this,” Ayers said. “I am not perfect by any means. If I had allowed or was part of, in any way, shape or form, an officer of mine to screw up a case like this is the day I would announce my retirement.”

Ayers wrote in his Facebook post the victims’ family is left with scars of the unresolved trauma, residents of the Bobwhite Road neighborhood question how safe they are and “the community has to live with the knowledge that those who are supposed to provide safety and justice failed to do so.”

“As individuals, we all make mistakes. However, having spent 30 years in the Sheriff’s office, having made mistakes during my 20 years as the Sheriff of Amherst County, and while having limited knowledge of the details of this case, I cannot comprehend the how and why of this colossal failure,” Ayers wrote. “With confidence, I can say, if during my tenure as Sheriff, I had allowed something like this to happen with a critical piece of evidence in a murder case, I would have been held accountable by the Commonwealth Attorneys with whom I had worked over the years.”

Ayers asked why it took so long to realize there was a problem with the chain of evidence and how a breach of procedure in handling the weapon, a vital piece of evidence, could take place.

“As far as the public knows, no one has been held accountable for this egregious failure,” Ayers wrote in the post. “Why? The Sheriff and Commonwealth Attorney are father and son-in-law.”

Ayers also said the investigator he mentioned in his post and another prosecutor in the case are married, and he questioned that.

When asked during an interview about Ayers' comment regarding Viar being Carver's father-in-law, Carver said it was irrelevant.

"That's not even worth dignifying," Carver added.

Carver's statement said he would rather be blasted politically than jeopardize his ethics or the chance at justice for Puleio and Goetz.

"I won't be baited into this," he wrote. "I won't put myself before this case. The truth will come out at trial."

In the interview, Carver reiterated more charges against Sales could be filed.

"This case is under investigation with every intention of bringing the charges back to trial," Carver said in the interview.

Sales has since relocated to New Hampshire and is in custody again in that state. He faces an assault charge in Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, the county's department of corrections confirmed.

Carver's statement said the publicity from Ayers' post is "reckless" and added in the interview the retired sheriff should know better.

"It's certainly hurting further prosecution of this case," Carver said.



Viar

In response to that, Ayers said: “I’ll be the first to say, based on what little bit of information is in my Facebook post, this case was jeopardized a long time prior to my Facebook post, but I should expect nothing different than that.”

Carver’s statement said he hopes citizens will see Ayers’ comments “for what it is ... selfish, political grandstanding at the expense of our victims and our quests for justice.”

Until the case is over, Carver said he can’t comment any further about it.

“The truth will come out at trial. Further truth can be shared after the trial,” Carver said in the statement, adding: “I also look forward to completing the ongoing investigation and the successful prosecution in the future.”

Although Ayers’ comments were on his personal Facebook page, not a county government page, Carver said of Ayers making such comments on social media while serving as a county supervisor: “This is the government acting badly,” directing that comment solely at Ayers and no other board members.

Ayers said in the interview he and Viar are not on speaking terms. He said he wrote his post as a concerned resident and feels crucial information about an important case is being swept under the rug.

“To see something like this is absolutely absurd,” Ayers said.

Carver’s statement reminds the community Amherst Circuit Court is open to the public when the case is tried.

Carver, Viar and Ayers are all up for re-election this year in the Nov. 7 election but none of the three have publicly announced whether they are running.

Ayers is in his eighth year of serving as District 3 supervisor and formerly ran for the House of Delegates’ District 24 seat in November 2018, losing to the late Ronnie Campbell by a single vote in a firehouse primary that month.

In closing his Facebook post, Ayers wrote Amherst County has been his home his entire life and he has spent 40 years in public service to the community.

“I cannot accept the lack of responsibility in this case,” Ayers wrote. “It has been brought to my attention that attempts have been made to have this case reviewed by state agencies, but to no avail. The inaccuracies and the lack of accountability in this case should be reviewed by an outside agency and a special prosecutor.”

He wrote it is extremely important that when the sheriff’s office or prosecutor’s office releases information to the family or community, it should be done with the utmost integrity.

“We as a community cannot and should not accept such behavior from the agency that is charged with providing safety and security for all of us,” Ayers said.

Carver said his office remains committed to bringing justice for the two victims and their family.

“I’m going to fight for justice as long as I’m here,” he said.

“As individuals, we all make mistakes. However, having spent 30 years in the Sheriff’s office, having made mistakes during my 20 years as the Sheriff of Amherst County, and while having limited knowledge of the details of this case, I cannot comprehend the how and why of this colossal failure.”

— **Jimmy Ayers**, Amherst County supervisor and former county sheriff in a Facebook post on the handling of a 2019 homicide and wounding case

By Justin Faulconer

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/crime-courts/final-defendant-in-2017-murder-of-lynchburg-teen-is-sentenced/article_9a039ae6-a196-11ed-baa5-9b5677c40234.html

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bedford county

Final defendant in 2017 murder of Lynchburg teen is sentenced

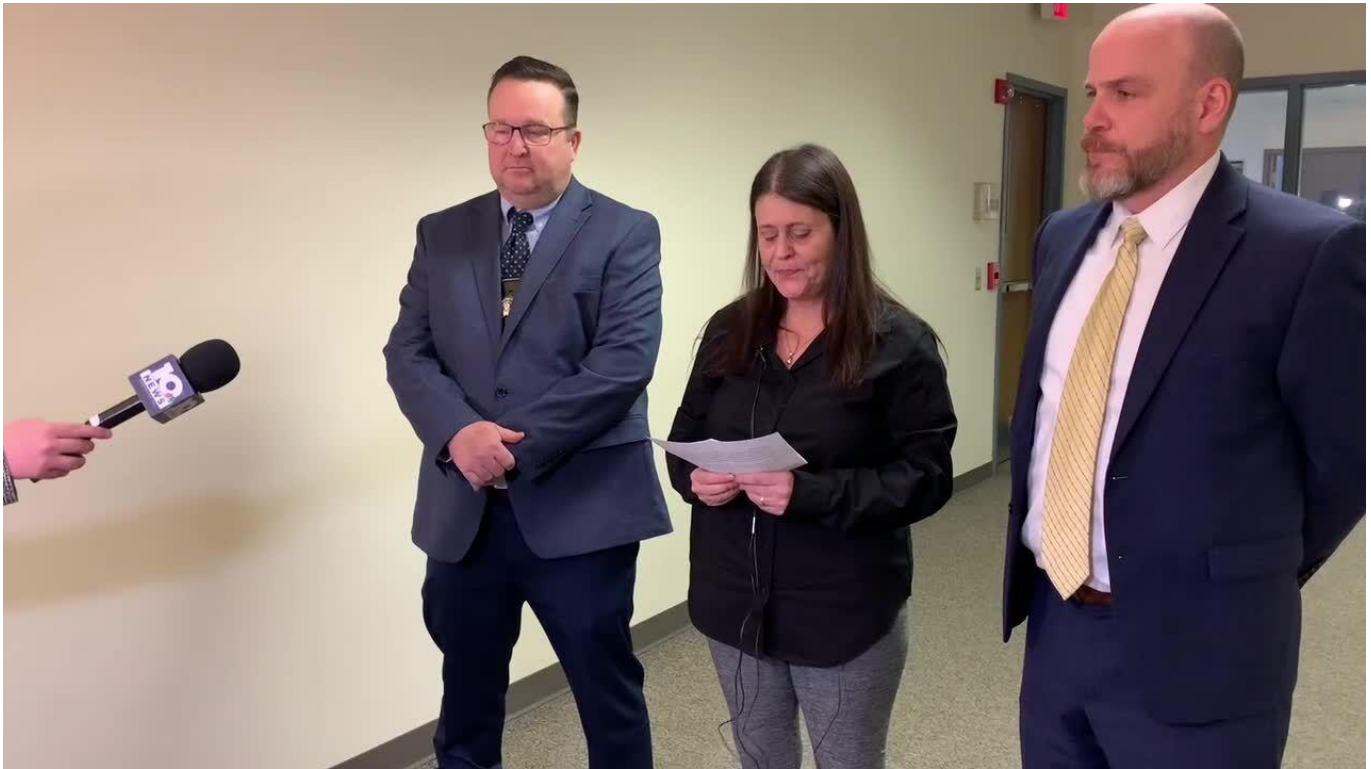
Justin Faulconer

Jan 31, 2023



Josue Moises Coreas-Ventura enters the courtroom for his sentencing at Bedford County Courthouse on Tuesday.
Paige Dingler photos, The News & Advance

Justin Faulconer



BEDFORD — A member of the MS-13 gang who Bedford County’s chief prosecutor said was the “architect” in a Lynchburg teen’s brutal March 2017 murder was sentenced Tuesday to two life sentences plus 10 years.



Coreas-Ventura

Josue Moises Coreas-Ventura, 26, was the last of five co-defendants sentenced in connection with the fatal stabbing of 17-year-old Raymond Wood. The gang abducted Wood from his Lynchburg home and killed him on a rural Bedford County road.

“These individuals took turns butchering him on the side of the road,” said Bedford Commonwealth’s Attorney Wes Nance.



A jury last February found Coreas-Ventura guilty of aggravated murder and abduction for financial benefit, and he also pleaded guilty to gang participation.

Nance said Coreas-Ventura provided the murder weapon, a knife, and was the one directing the planned attack on Wood, who was lured outside his home by a fake drug deal.

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“We’re dealing with the leader of the death squad,” Nance said of Coreas-Ventura. “There’s no question he was the leader of the pack ... but today proves he will not get away with it.”

Marjorie Stagno, Wood’s mother, testified Coreas-Ventura was the only one of the five for whom she wished the death penalty. She asked Judge James Updike Jr. to sentence him to the fullest extent he could get, which the defendant received.

“In my eyes, you are the definition of pure evil,” she told Coreas-Ventura in court.



Raymond Wood’s mother, Marjorie Stagno, testifies during the sentencing of Josue Moises Coreas-Ventura at Bedford County Courthouse on Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2023.

Before sentencing, Coreas-Ventura said to Stagno he knows he is responsible for her suffering.

“I could have prevented the murder, but I did not do it,” he said. “I ask God to forgive me.”

The other four defendants were sentenced as follows: Kevin Josue Soto Bonilla, life sentence; Lisandro Antonio Posada-Vasquez, 75 years; Cristian Jose Sanchez-Gomez, 60 years; and Victor Arnoldo Rodas, 55 years.

Stagno said her son's murder has been "pure devastation" and the multiple other defendants have been sentenced in connection with her son's murder in the prosecution of the MS-13 network in Virginia and Maryland.

Speaking to Coreas-Ventura, Stagno said he came to Lynchburg to hide from his involvement in another Maryland homicide and gathered other gang members to carry out Wood's slaying.

"It was your knife that you showed as a prized possession that was used to murder my son," Stagno said. "You are part of an evil, evil organization and in my opinion, you are inhumane and have no regard for life."



Bedford Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance speaks during the sentencing of Josue Moises Coreas-Ventura at Bedford County Courthouse on Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2023.

Paige Dingle, The News & Advance

She said she hopes his years in prison are hard and he can no longer commit more heinous acts that destroy other families.

"It has devastated my family," Stagno said of Wood's murder. "It's been hard because we're broken ... That was my circle. They were my kids. I would do anything for them."

The three-and-a-half-hour sentencing hearing Tuesday included testimony from a range of medical professionals for the defense who spoke on Coreas-Ventura's social history and upbringing in El Salvador that led to his involvement in the violent MS-13 gang.

A mitigation specialist and attorney who went to El Salvador to research Coreas-Ventura's family history as part of assisting the defense testified Coreas-Ventura suffered head injuries as a child and was in second grade at age 12 because he was

held back.

Coreas-Ventura was bullied, suffered from depression and had suicidal thoughts, the specialist testified.

When the defendant was about 15, he was attacked at knifepoint on his way to a festival and it led to his reputation as someone who didn't defend himself, giving way to the MS-13 taking him in for protection, the specialist said in court.

His uncle was stabbed to death in El Salvador and the defendant later came to Florida and eventually Maryland, according to testimony.

At one point, Coreas-Ventura was homeless and selling drugs, and he attempted to escape the gang, the specialist testified.

A doctor who examined Coreas-Ventura while in custody testified Coreas-Ventura suffered from brain damage, had an intellectual deficiency and showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorders and hallucinations.

Another doctor who performed a neuropsychological evaluation on Coreas-Ventura testified he was "well outside the area of normal functioning" and a "significantly damaged person" because of previous traumas.

During cross-examination, Nance said that in early 2016 Coreas-Ventura's social media showed him glorifying his role in the gang by posting pictures of himself flashing MS-13 gang signs and holding weapons.

Chis Kawalczuk, Coreas-Ventura's attorney, said there were conflicting accounts among the gang members of events that unfolded that night and Sanchez-Gomez minimized his role.

His client was reading at a sixth-grade level, had brain damage and suffered "unimaginable trauma," Kawalczuk said.

"I do not accept he was the architect of his crime," Kawalczuk told Updike. "If this was a plan, judge, it wasn't a very good one."

Kawalczuk said the defense's focus during the trial was the element of abduction for financial gain, which he doesn't believe was met, though he respects the jury's verdicts.

"I admire that jury," Kawalczuk said. "This was a horrific case ... this was a terrible crime. And for what?"

He argued Wood was murdered not for financial gain but because of perceived disrespect toward another one of the gang members.

After the hearing, he said his heart breaks for Wood's mother and also for Coreas-Ventura's mother, describing the case as a tragedy across the board.

He said Coreas-Ventura faced "unimaginable horrors" in his home country and was essentially forced into a life of crime at age 14.

Coreas-Ventura not getting the death penalty also was a positive outcome, he said, as that option was taken off the table for the trial phase because Virginia has abolished the death penalty.

"The way that MS-13 sort of co-opts these young men from El Salvador and Central America is really, really, it's sad. It's just sad," Kawalczuk said.

In a statement after the sentencing, Stagno said Wood was full of life with many hopes and promises and in his 17 years was kind, loving and had the biggest smile.

"He has made an imprint on many people's lives," she said. "He loved his family fiercely."

She said she has been his voice for the past 5 years and 10 months and will continue to do so. His last words to her were, "I love you mama," she said.

Nance said Tuesday's sentencing marked a day to remember Wood.

"This is the last opportunity I have to fight for Raymond Wood, and it's been an honor to do so," Nance said in arguing for the maximum punishment.

Nance said the sentencing sends a strong message that law enforcement "will not stand for this type of terror in our backyards."

Stagno said justice was served for her son and thanked the law enforcement agencies for their hard work in delivering it.

On the stand, she told Coreas-Ventura the gang didn't murder a weak boy in a weak community.

"You murdered a strong boy from one strong mama in a strong community," she told him.

"It has devastated my family. It's been hard because we're broken ... That was my circle. They were my kids. I would do anything for them."

— **Marjorie Stagno**, on the murder of her son, Raymond Wood

By Justin Faulconer

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/man-sentenced-to-50-years-for-attack-on-realtor-in-bedford-county/article_98e03bac-5d60-11ee-ae05-3b656f37a2f7.html

FEATURED TOP STORY BREAKING

Bedford County

Man sentenced to 50 years for attack on Realtor in Bedford County

Justin Faulconer

Sep 27, 2023



BEDFORD — A Roanoke area man was sentenced to 50 years in prison Wednesday in Bedford Circuit Court for the brutal attack of a Smith Mountain Lake Realtor when the two were alone during an open house.

Dustin Robert Holdren, 37, pleaded guilty last year to one count each of aggravated malicious wounding and robbery. The charges stem from a June 20, 2020, incident where Holdren attacked Lenora Farrington, an agent with Keller Williams Realty, with a wrench at a Mariners Landing home in Huddleston.

Bedford County Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Lawrence Steele said Holdren struck Farrington in the head multiple times with the wrench and took money from her purse in an unprovoked attack that shocked the community. Holdren purchased several items and gas at a nearby store and was arrested shortly after, Steele has said.

Farrington suffered 10 to 12 severe head injuries and was hospitalized, law enforcement has said. In accordance with the March 2022 plea agreement, another felony charge of attempted rape was dropped.

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During a sentencing hearing before Judge James Updike Jr. on Wednesday, Farrington testified of the many effects of the injuries she has suffered for the past three years and three months. Holdren's family members in video statements played during the hearing described him as a dedicated father, son and a hard worker.

Holdren testified extensively Wednesday of his struggles with drug addiction and alcohol abuse. A longtime Bedford County resident originally from Roanoke, the Staunton River High School graduate said he has worked since age 14 mostly in automotive and at one point was homeless because of his drug use, which he called "a tough battle" and roller-coaster.

After getting a job back and cashing out a check, Holdren went on a two-day binge smoking crack and abusing alcohol when he ran out of money, which led to the events of the attack, according to Holdren's testimony. He smoked and snorted methamphetamine at a friend's house and experienced "euphoria" that turned into a state of paranoia, he testified.

Holdren described his use of drugs as a “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” situation and he stopped by the open house after seeing the face of a Realtor he knew who he planned to hit up “with some sob story” in hopes of getting money. Instead, he encountered Farrington, who according to her testimony was conducting the open house for a colleague.

“I never went into that house with any malicious intent whatsoever,” Holdren said.

He testified he was “in a very real state of fear in my mind” and hid drugs in the house, which caused him a short time later to return and retrieve the meth. Holdren spoke with Farrington during the tour and upon going back saw the wrench in the garage and took it while thinking “I need to get away,” he said.

He recalled “fighting with myself” and crouching under the sink like he was checking something and testified of his split-second decision to strike her with the wrench. He testified as she fell he struck her again when he saw blood.

“She was very strong through all of it,” Holdren said.

He sped away from the scene and said he was “in a huge state of panic and fear I created.” Holdren said he later gave a full confession when in custody of law enforcement.

“It took a long time to understand what happened,” Holdren said. “I don’t hurt people.”

He said as awful as the incident was, his arrest and confinement caused a forced rehabilitation and he has been sober for more than three years.

“I never asked for a bond because I knew I was right where I need to be,” Holdren said.

Holdren said he felt guilt and shame from the attack. Steele asked him about comments Holdren made from a jail call to family describing Farrington’s account of the incident as “exaggerated” and akin to a Stephen King horror novel.

Steele said Farrington suffered two broken bones in her skull and Holdren minimized his role in the attack, which the defendant disputed during the questioning.

The prosecutor also brought up previous text messages in which Holdren communicated to the mother of one of his children he would slit her throat and set her house on fire. Holdren said he made those remarks while under the influence of drugs.

“Yes sir, I said every word of it and I have paid greatly,” Holdren told Steele.

Steele said Farrington wasn’t supposed to be at the open house that day, was beat within inches of her life and is living with daily struggles.

“She will never get to live a normal life again,” Steele said, adding Holdren had the “audacity” to call her version of events exaggerated.

“What the defendant did to her that day is absolutely a horror story,” Steele said.

Steele said the commonwealth is not unsympathetic to the effects of drug addiction but noted Holdren, in four previous court proceedings, was told by four different judges to get help and stay clean and he refused to listen.

Morgan Hollister, Holdren’s attorney, said he has taken responsibility for his actions and has shown great remorse. Hollister said it is a “hard case” she thinks about every day and both Holdren’s and Farrington’s lives were forever changed over the course of a minute.

“He’s horrified about what he did,” Hollister said. “...He has to wake up every day knowing he hurt another human being.”

Hollister asked Holdren be sentenced to six years and said his conduct that way was “completely out of character.” She described Holdren as a good person who made a bad decision and he has missed many milestones in his children’s lives, asking the judge to take into account his psychiatric issues.

Steele argued this sentencing should go above the guidelines for such cases, adding: “Some bureaucrats can’t put a number on this.” He asked Updike to send a message that such “senseless, brutal and life-changing violence” won’t be tolerated in Bedford County.

Holdren told Farrington before sentencing he is truly sorry and he’ll never forgive himself for the incident.

“As bad as it sounds, you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Holdren told her. “...I would have never thought that my addictions would have taken me somewhere like that.”

Holdren said in that 60 seconds, he changed both their lives forever, and he can’t imagine how scared and confused she must have been or how angry she should be over the physical impairments she’s had to deal with.

“In this terrible way you saved my life,” Holdren said to Farrington. “I was fighting a battle I couldn’t win ... the next step for me was death.”

He said he is thankful for three years sobriety and prays she can still have a successful life, adding he is desperate to get back to his children.

Updike said the high end of the sentencing guidelines of 16 years and one month in prison is “woefully inadequate” and Farrington was very fortunate to survive her injuries. He also sentenced Holdren to three years for violating probation, credited him with time served since his June 2020 arrest and ordered that he have no further contact with Farrington.

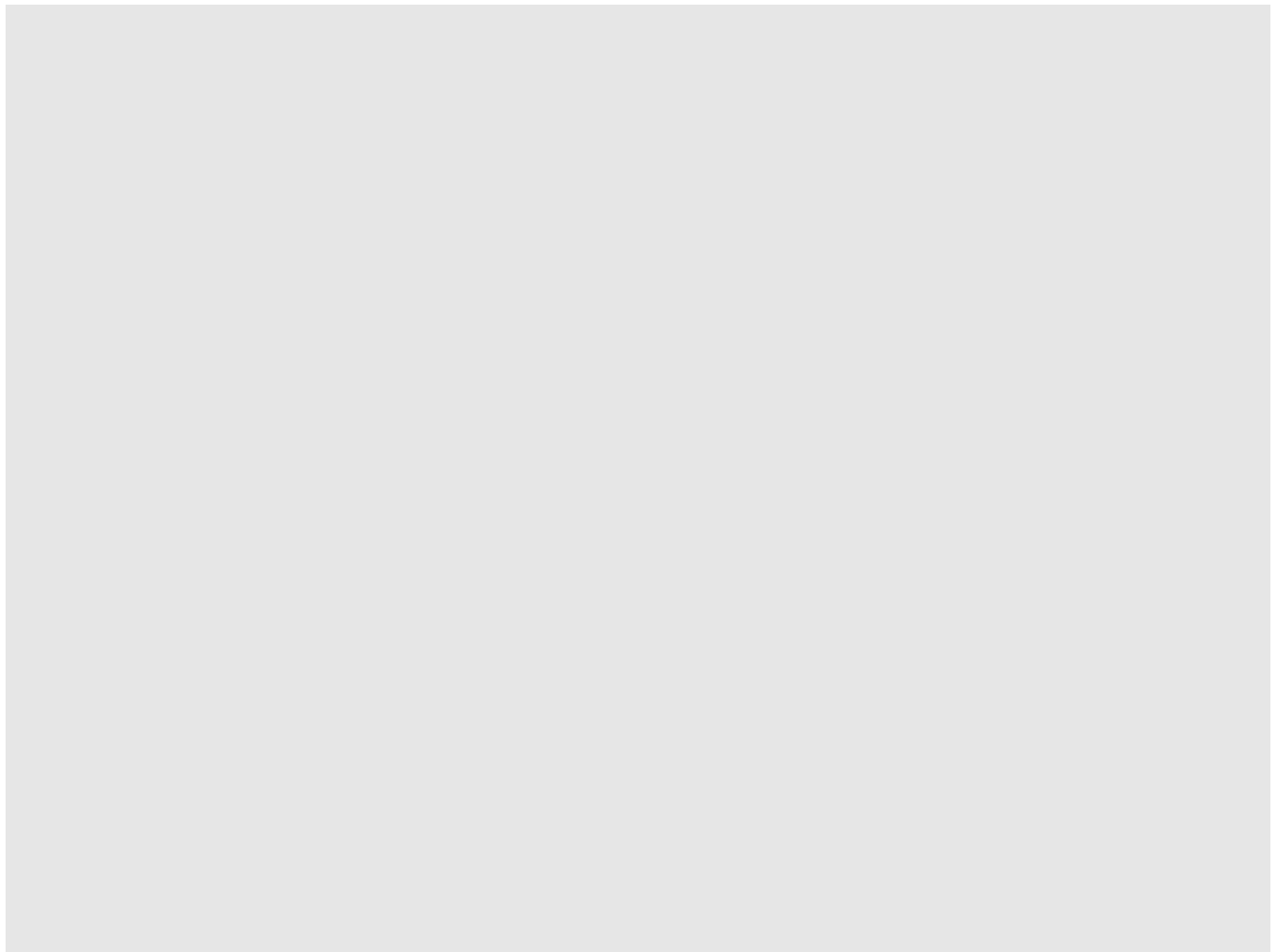
Farrington said rules were changed following the attack, requiring two people to be present while holding open houses and attendees are barred from bringing in objects such as a wrench.

Despite the post-traumatic stress and other impairments she deals with, Farrington said she still loves helping people find homes in an “all sorts of wonky” housing market.

“So helping people to navigate that and get through and find a place to call home, that keeps them on track financially, is that much more of a passion project for me,” Farrington said.

She said after the hearing she appreciates the judge going above the sentencing guidelines in giving Holdren extensive additional prison time.

“While I feel for him and I feel for his family, it’s his good fortune that I am so strong because he should have been on trial for murder,” Farrington said.



Holdren

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By Justin Falconer
