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Trans woman receives five-year sentence in 'pumping' case

Three others await trial in case over December 2003 death

By ZACK HUDSON

A south Georgia transgendered woman was sentenced to five years in prison for her role in the December 2003 death of another transgendered person after receiving illicit silicone injections.

Stephen O'Neal Thomas, 31, was originally charged with felony murder, involuntary manslaughter and unauthorized practice of medicine in relation to the death of Andre Jeter, 23. Thomas injected Jeter, also a male-to-female transgender, with industrial grade silicone in her face and chest up to three times, authorities said.

Jeter passed out after Thomas injected her for the last time on Dec. 10, 2003. She survived one month in the Medical Intensive Care Unit at Albany's Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital before dying of organ failure caused by blood poisoning, prosecutors said.

Thomas, who was arrested in March 2004, pleaded guilty to one count of involuntary manslaughter and four counts of the unauthorized practice of medicine without a license on Feb. 2. She was sentenced to five years in prison with an additional 10 years on probation.

"The state found it was acceptable to plea this case," said Greg Edwards, chief assistant district attorney in Dougherty County. "We found that the victim, Jeter, was a willing participant."

Edwards said that investigators found "no direct intent" from Thomas to kill Jeter.

The prosecutor said Thomas injected willing victims who were recruited by three other transgendered women — Kontavious Parks, Freddie Clyde and Marcrae Edwards. The three were charged with unauthorized practice of medicine and criminal conspiracy for attempting to mislead law enforcement officials during the investigation.

James Paulk, chief investigator for the Dougherty County District Attorney's office, said that Parks, Clyde and Marcrae attracted customers who paid between \$300 and \$500 for the injections, often assisting Thomas in the actual procedures. In exchange for their help, Thomas provided the three with silicone injections, Paulk said.

Thomas' plea deal with prosecutors stipulates that she testify against Parks, Clyde and Marcrae, as well as Verna Barnett, a Gwinnett County woman arrested in August. Investigators said Barnett, also charged with practicing medicine without a license, with training Thomas and others to "pump" victims.

After Jeter's death, four transgendered women said they were suffering from silicone-induced illnesses after being injected by Thomas.



Transgender activist Dallas Denny said she is not satisfied with the recent sentence given to an Albany woman accused of administering illicit silicone injections that led to the death of a woman in December 2003. (Photo by Joan Sherwood)

When investigators raided Barnett's home in August, they found at least two containers of industrial or food quality silicone and an area they described as an "operating room likely used to perform illegal plastic surgery," according to investigators. They maintain that Barnett trained Thomas and others throughout the southeast to "pump" other transgendered women.

"Certainly the situation we had was at least a regional problem," Edwards said.

Thomas' attorney, Willie Weaver,

refused to comment. Thomas remains in the Dougherty County Jail until she is assigned a prison to serve her sentence.

Edwards, Parks Clyde remain free on bond, but have since moved to Savannah. Clyde was arrested in November on identity theft charges.

The plea has left at least one advocate for the civil rights of transgendered people dismayed. Dallas Denny, the co-founder of Gender Education & Advocacy, who has been consulted by investigators as well as the media about the case, said she is not satisfied with the sentence Thomas received.

"I'm a little chagrined that the sentence turned out in the way it did," Denny said. "Certainly I'm not surprised. Basically, this person was engaged in a criminal enterprise that is not unlike organized crime."

Denny, who is a psychologist, authored a study on the dangers of "pumping" and said it's a problem that "has been going on for decades."

"It's the promise of instant curve, and that can be very appealing," she said.

Once injected into the body, silicone can migrate to places where it's not intended, causing skin discoloration, scarring and medical problems in organs, according to Dr. Mark Koponen, deputy chief medical examiner at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

Often the silicone ends up in the blood stream and can block small blood vessels in the lungs, resulting in potentially lethal scarring of the lung tissue, he said.