

Chesco judge: State prison for fatal heroin OD

By Michael P. Rellahan Staff Writer mrellahan@dailylocal.com On Twitter @ChescoCourtNews
Jul 12, 2019

WEST CHESTER — Exhorting him to dedicate his future to staying clean and sober, a Common Pleas Court judge on Thursday sentenced a Coatesville man, who admitted giving his girlfriend the dose of heroin that ended up killing her, to state prison for his complicity in her death.

“What are you going to do?” Judge Allison Bell Royer asked defendant Justin Coleman, rhetorically, before handing down the six to 12 years sentence for drug delivery resulting in death. What path will he chose when he is released from prison

“Are you going to go down the same road,” as his girlfriend, who insisted on shooting heroin the same day she was released from prison on a probation violation, a decision that turned out to be a fatal one, “or do you make a change?

“I believe you are remorseful and would have made a different choice” than to supply 37-year-old Sarah Trinea Cortlessa with the heroin she demanded. “But I don’t know whether either one of you were capable of making a different choice then. That is how powerful addiction is. Nothing is enough to beat the power of those demons.”

But Royer noted that others have overcome their addictions and had gone on to help others caught in the grip of heroin. “Maybe you can make a difference for someone else.”

The sentence Royer imposed was slightly less than the seven year minimum that Deputy District Attorney Carlos Barraza had recommended for Coleman, arguing that his actions the night of Cortlessa’s death — failing to immediately call for emergency responders to revive her and seemingly worried more about his own prospects than her condition when police arrived — showed a lack of true remorse.

“As she was lying there dying, the first things he asks is, ‘Am I going to go to jail for this?’ Those are not the actions of a man who wants to help the woman he says he cares about,” Barraza told Royer.

But it was considerably more than Coleman’s attorneys had asked for in a memo they submitted to Royer, which asked for a sentence that could have set him free after serving less than a year behind bars. Defense attorney Thomas Ramsay and his co-counsel, Marissa Ramsay, argued that severe punishment should be reserved for drug dealers who sell heroin in fatal overdose cases, not fellow addicts who are many times friends or family of the deceased.

“He is certainly not Public Enemy No. 1,” Thomas Ramsay said in making his presentation. “Drug addicts use drugs. Drug dealers sell drugs.”

For his part, Coleman, 39 — who has been incarcerated in Chester County Prison since his arrest the day after Cortlessa’s fatal overdose — expressed sorrow for what he had put the family of his longtime girlfriend and fellow addict through, as well as his own, but seemed to indicate that she had badgered him into giving her the heroin that killed her.

“I loved Sarah more than anyone in the world,” he told the judge during his statement to the court, as his mother, some supporters, and Cortlessa’s parents sat listening. “I would never intentionally harmed her in any way. I wish it could have been different.”

He recounted how when he picked her up at the Montgomery County Correctional Center the afternoon of July 18, 2018, he told her he had suffered a heroin overdose the night before but had been saved by a neighbor who had Narcan, the anti-overdose medication. The two swore they would kick heroin, he said.

But when they returned to the apartment they shared on East Lincoln Highway in Coatesville she apparently began drinking and taking prescription drugs with neighbors. Coming home, she demanded he get her some heroin so she could “get high.” He eventually broke down and prepared what he hoped would be a mild dose of the heroin he used the day before.

It was enough to immediately send her over the edge towards death.

According to statements in court Thursday and court records, it seems that drugs had shaped the tragic lives that both Coleman and Cortlessa led. The two met in 2009 and began living together, in and out of trouble with the law, and in and out of drug programs, struggling to get by.

Coleman's brother Travis died of a heroin overdose in 2005 at their mother's house. In 2009, Cortlessa's 2-year-old son, Joseph, died after his father, a Charlestown man named Ian Kohn, fed him drugs mixed with Gatorade in a baby bottle.

Coincidentally, Cortlessa's mother, Glinda Cortlessa of Downingtown, spoke at both the sentencing proceeding for Kohn in 2010 and on Thursday for Coleman.

“I don't always believe that prison is right” for people with drug problems, said Glinda Cortlessa, when Kohn was sentenced to state prison. “Drugs have ruined a lot of people in our family.”

Addressing Royer, the grey-haired woman, expressed deep grief. “All I can say is that I feel broken at this whole situation. Nobody is going to win today. Nothing is going to bring Sarah back.

“I just miss my daughter,” she said.

To contact staff writer Michael P. Rellahan call 610-696-1544.

To contact Staff Writer Michael P. Rellahan call 610-696-1544.

Michael P. Rellahan

@ChescoCourtNews on Twitter

Michael P. Rellahan has been a staff reporter and editor at the Daily Local News since 1982. He has covered all kinds of news over the years but is now assigned to report on court and legal news, as well as Chester County government news and politics.
