

Appeals court upholds convictions in murder of Newport man

Body left near highway east of Astoria

By ERICK BENGEL
The Astorian

The Oregon Court of Appeals has affirmed the convictions of a couple who in September 2016 murdered a Newport man and left his body near the highway east of Astoria.

Adeena Marilyn Copell, now 45, and Christian John Wilkins, now 42, were sentenced in Clatsop County Circuit Court in 2019 for beating to death Howard Vinge, 71.

They killed Vinge in his RV, which they stole along with a lux-

ury sedan, and later dumped his body down an embankment off of U.S. Highway 30. They ditched the RV on U.S. Highway 26.

The couple were arrested in Arizona in October 2016. In 2019, they were sentenced to a minimum of 25 years in prison for murder, second-degree abuse of a corpse and two counts of unauthorized use of a vehicle. Copell had a jury trial, while Wilkins pleaded guilty.

In Copell's appeal, the state Office of Public Defense Services argued that her Miranda rights were violated when she was apprehended near Flagstaff. They also argued there may have been prosecutorial misconduct during closing arguments, a finding that

could have led to a mistrial.

Scott McCracken, a Clatsop County deputy district attorney, prosecuted the case with Beau Peterson, now a Circuit Court judge. McCracken said the affirmation is "a big deal to us, because it means we don't have to retry it right now."

The state appeals court affirmed the conviction without issuing an opinion. This, McCracken said, is "just the court saying, 'Everything's fine. We're not going to tell you why, it's just ... everything's fine.'"

McCracken said Copell can petition for review to the Oregon Supreme Court. But the state's highest court is unlikely to take up the case, he said.



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

Adeena Copell, right, reacts as the verdict is read during her murder trial in 2019.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

A re-created canopy hangs over the entrance to the Merwyn Apartments. The old hotel building had long been a blight on Duane Street.

Merwyn: A struggle to find building managers

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served by most communities. It's hard to finance housing like this, so to be able to get it is a real benefit for the community."

Most of the units target people earning between 30% and 60% of the county's median income—\$15,330 to \$30,660 annually based on 2021 data.

The higher priced units are designed to draw downtown workers, while the lower-priced units are aimed at people who are homeless or in unstable housing.

Leah Cooper, the director of operations with Innovative Housing, said the makeup of tenants at the Merwyn is currently weighted toward people earning 30% of median income because of the order on the waitlist.

"When there is opportunities for affordable housing, a lot of service providers will help get their clients into housing right off the bat," Cooper said. "So you might have a population that is more vulnerable, harder to house."

"That first year can often be about helping people follow the leasing rules, live among strangers and find some community. We want to provide housing for everyone, but sometimes people are not a good fit."

The nonprofit provides a resident services coordinator at other facilities it manages to help address those

expected challenges, but that position does not exist at the Merwyn.

Cooper said the nonprofit tries to work with residents to prevent eviction, and partners with Clatsop Community Action to provide services and resources to struggling tenants.

Some of the behavioral issues caused people to move out of the building.

Cooper is hopeful that some of the worrisome behavior has eased, and that turnover will become less frequent. However, Cooper said turnover is not uncommon for the first year, and that it is similar to what the nonprofit has seen with other properties.

"So, it was not surprising to us," Cooper said. "There was a lot of people that were very low income moving into (the building). And I think it speaks more to the lack of other options in the community. Astoria has a lot of folks that are living very marginally, either outside or very unstably housed."

Cooper said that some people who moved in may not have had stable housing for a while. Sometimes, that comes with challenges that can be difficult for other tenants and the building, she said.

The nonprofit has also struggled to find building managers.

Since there are not a lot of other affordable housing developments on the North

Coast, Cooper said it is difficult to find local people who have experience doing the work. She said people they have hired have had to move from out of the area, and that it has been a challenge to find the right fit.

While the income ranges at the Merwyn have parallels to the workforce housing being proposed for Heritage Square, there are key differences.

The workforce housing units at Heritage Square would target people at 60% to 80% of area median income—\$30,660 to \$40,880 annually based on 2021 data.

The supportive housing units at Heritage Square in partnership with Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare would target people at 30% of area median income. Unlike at the Merwyn, the supportive housing would include access to staff and services from the mental health agency.

An increase in calls to police

Astoria police examined calls for service at the Merwyn, and within a 150 foot radius, and found that calls have doubled since the apartments opened to tenants.

Since last March, police said, there were 217 calls to the area, compared to 100 calls the previous year.

Police Chief Geoff Spalding said that while many of the calls are to the Merwyn, the overall increase is not

necessarily tied solely to the building.

Megan Leatherman, the city's community development director, said the city has not received any formal complaints about the Merwyn. The Astoria Downtown Historic District Association has not received any, either.

Savannah Thomas, who moved into the Merwyn with her 4-year old daughter soon after it opened, said she is pleased with the way issues have been addressed.

She also drew a distinction between behavior in the neighborhood, particularly the Garden of Surging Waves, and the Merwyn. She thinks behavioral issues are often unfairly attributed to the Merwyn.

Thomas, who grew up in Warrenton, helps run Pat's Pantry downtown with her father, Dennis. She said she would not be living at the Merwyn with her daughter if she did not feel safe. She said she enjoys being able to walk to work and come home to a nice apartment.

One of the things Thomas said she values most is seeing people living in a beautifully restored building who otherwise would not have the opportunity.

"To be able to live in a place like that, and feel like you're in a place you deserve to be — and to be able to afford it — that is freaking cool in and of itself," she said. "I think that's really big."

Shooting: 'This case could have gone on for another 10 years'

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An AR-15 was found in his suitcase. He also had a bizarre cache that included a hard hat, hair dye, new clothes, a reflective vest and a breathing mask, The Astorian reported. What Savinskiy intended to do with all of those items remains a mystery, Brown said.

Once in jail, Savinskiy tried to put out a contract to kill Symonds and Savinskiy's ex-wife, Olga — two witnesses against him — and to permanently disable then-deputy district attorney Brown with a baseball bat. Savinskiy's cellmate, James Russell, who informed police of the plot, wore a wire and recorded Savinskiy admitting to it.

Symonds spoke at Thursday's sentencing, asking the court to consider how Savinskiy's actions — both the shootout and the plan to have him murdered — affected him.

"They were detrimental to my career with the Astoria Police Department," Symonds said, "and I have suffered a great deal of loss of sleep and physical illnesses as a result of

the stress that I was placed under for the extended period of time, post the incident and especially post the threats and the attempt to have a contract on my life and my family's life."

In 2013, Judge Philip Nelson sentenced Savinskiy to more than 34 years in prison. The Oregon Supreme Court reversed the sentence, ruling in light of the Oregon v. Prieto-Rubio decision that the evidence collected by body wire was only admissible in the conspiracy charges, not in the Lamplighter charges.

The Circuit Court would have needed to split the trial in two: one for the Lamplighter incident, the other for Savinskiy's attempt to hire a hitman.

Kantor commended the Circuit Court and Savinskiy's Portland-based defense attorney, Alex Hamalian, for coming to an agreement and bringing the case to an end 10 years after it began.

"This case could have gone on for another 10 years without an effort to resolve it practically, sensibly and thoughtfully," Kantor said.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Oregon will lift an indoor mask mandate imposed to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Masks: Monday will mark the two-year anniversary of the first COVID-19 case in Oregon

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feedback from school districts. Originally, state officials said the K-12 indoor mask rule would lift on March 31.

The mask mandate will remain in health care settings.

Monday will mark the two-year anniversary of the first COVID-19 case in Oregon. State health officials have noted six waves of infection in Oregon over the 24 months.

Oregon had reported 691,337 virus cases and 6,578 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic as of Thursday.

The Oregon Health Authority reported 13 new virus cases for Clatsop County on Thursday. Since the pandemic began, the county had recorded 4,503 virus cases as of Thursday.

Sturgell: Could get 20 years in prison if he violates probation

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If he violates probation, Sturgell could serve 20 years in prison.

"Given what the reality in the future is, given Mr. Sturgell's health, I think the sentence accommodates pretty much every element of justice we could bring to it," Judge Henry Kantor said.

Sturgell was originally sentenced in 2019 to more than 13 years in prison for counts involving first-degree sodomy, first-degree unlaw-

ful sexual penetration, second-degree sex abuse, bribing a witness and witness tampering.

An Astoria man who joined Sturgell at the hotel and also had sex with the victim received probation, as did the Hammond fisherman who approached the victim's father on Sturgell's behalf.

In September, a Marion County judge, Claudia Burton, voided Sturgell's convictions.

Burton found that Sturgell was poorly rep-

resented when his Salem-based defense attorney, Jason Thompson, did not object to the state using Sturgell's security release agreement as a trial exhibit.

This document listed sex abuse charges that had already been dismissed and contained other insinuating details that, Burton ruled, could have biased some jurors, whose verdicts on the sex abuse charges were nonunanimous.

In 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that nonunanimous verdicts unconstitu-

tionally violate the Sixth Amendment guarantee of a right to trial by impartial jury. The court ruled in 2021 that its decision did not apply retroactively, but gave states the ability to consider whether older verdicts should be reviewed.

The Oregon Legislature is weighing a bill to give some inmates convicted by nonunanimous juries the chance for new trials. Since Sturgell's original convictions were vacated last year, he would not have been eligible.