

Nephew not guilty in aunt's '02 death

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Mahopac man, 57, acquitted of all charges; judge cites lack of external neck injuries

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The Journal News

WHITE PLAINS - A Mahopac man accused of killing his 83-year-old aunt in a case in which the defense claimed she was not the victim of a homicide was acquitted of all charges yesterday.

John Spruill, who cared for Aniela Walker after the death of her husband eight years ago, buried his face in his hands as state Supreme Court Justice Mary Smith announced her verdict.

"I thought Vietnam was hard, but this is the hardest thing I ever went through in my life," Spruill said outside the courtroom after hugging relatives and friends. "My whole world was turned upside down. It was like I was in the 'Twilight Zone' to be charged (with killing my aunt). I'm just glad it's over."

Walker died at White Plains Hospital Center on Dec. 31, 2002, the morning after Spruill rushed her there from her Crane Avenue home and told the staff he had found her unconscious in the kitchen. Walker would have been cremated three days later, but White Plains detectives arranged for an autopsy after friends of Walker's suggested she had been arguing with Spruill the night she was taken to the hospital.

The case was ruled a homicide after Dr. Louis Roh, Westchester's deputy chief medical examiner, found bruises, a head injury, 14 rib fractures and two small broken bones in the thyroid cartilage of Walker's neck and determined she died of blunt force trauma and strangulation.

Spruill was then interviewed by White Plains detectives, initially repeating the account that he found Walker unconscious. When they told him of the autopsy findings, he eventually acknowledged the argument. He claimed that Walker was enraged and that he shook her by the shoulders to calm her down but that she fell, and he lost his balance and fell on top of her. He insisted he lied because he didn't think people would believe him.

Spruill was a bus driver for Liberty Lines and frequently stopped off at Walker's home after his shift to drop off groceries, pet food or newspapers. In the months before her death, the upstairs apartment of her house was being renovated so that his son and a friend of his son's could move in. But Walker was balking at the prospect.

Spruill, who was the beneficiary and executor of her will, told detectives that she had threatened to cut off his inheritance, although Smith heard testimony during the trial that Walker frequently made such remarks when she wanted to get something done.

Defense lawyer Andrew Quinn also elicited testimony that Spruill's actions once his aunt was in the hospital - signing a do-not-resuscitate form and planning for cremation - were consistent with her wishes and not evidence that he was hoping to get away with anything and avoid an autopsy. He maintained that Spruill was guilty only of lying after he panicked.

Quinn challenged Roh's findings, suggesting that he set out to classify the case a homicide without considering alternatives for the injuries. Two forensic pathologists testified for the defense that they did not believe Walker's death was a homicide, suggesting that she could have died from heart complications caused by Spruill falling on top of her and that some of her injuries could have resulted from lifesaving efforts at the hospital.

Spruill, 57, was charged with second-degree murder and first-degree manslaughter, but Smith also considered lesser charges of second-degree manslaughter and criminally negligent homicide. Despite the more serious

charges, Assistant District Attorney George Bolen suggested at the end of the nonjury trial last week that Spruill was guilty of second-degree manslaughter for recklessly causing his aunt's death.

While Smith said that Roh's findings were credible based on the injuries he observed, she was more convinced that Walker's death could have been the result of sudden heart failure as a result of the 240-pound Spruill falling on her frail body.

She said the lack of external neck injuries convinced her that Walker had not been strangled.

Although it was clear from Smith's preliminary findings that she had a reasonable doubt about Spruill's guilt, her final not-guilty verdict to the criminally negligent homicide was greeted by a relieved cheer from more than a dozen of his supporters.

Afterward he thanked them for sticking by him for the past 18 months.

"It was a good verdict. I think the lack of medical evidence that this was ever a homicide won the case," Quinn said later. "The judge paid attention to the complex medical evidence."

Quinn called Spruill "one of the hardest-working men I've ever met" and said he was hopeful that he could soon resume his job driving for Liberty Lines.

It was the second straight White Plains homicide trial that ended in acquittal. In March, Pia Stefanelli was found not guilty of murder and other charges in the shooting death of Jeffrey Troebs, a Philadelphia police officer who was the father of her son.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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