

Officer's killer is sentenced

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MIDDLETOWN

Frank W. Budka will serve 4 1/2 to 17 years in the vehicular homicide death of Middletown Detective Christopher Jones.

Jan. 29 will be a busy day each year for Frank W. Budka, at least for the next 21 years.

On that date, a Bucks County judge ruled Tuesday, Budka must read each and every victim impact letter submitted by the widow, children, friends, family and coworkers of Middletown police Detective Christopher Jones.

Judge Albert Cepparulo told Budka, 46, of Middletown, that he wanted him to review those statements on the anniversary of Jones' death each year as a reminder of how his actions devastated so many lives.

"I want you to do that so you'll never forget the pain you caused," the judge said.

Cepparulo handed down the ruling as part of Budka's sentence for vehicular homicide and related crimes. Budka must serve 4 1/2 to 17 years in a state prison plus four years of probation, and pay more than \$14,000 in fines and restitution.

"I'm truly sorry. I wish I would have died that day," Budka said in the packed Doylestown courtroom. "Now I need to do what I can to save a life, because I took a life."

Jones, 37, a married father of three, died of head trauma after being pinned under his police cruiser following a chain-reaction crash on the Route 1 Superhighway on Jan. 29, 2009.

Tests would later show that Budka, who was speeding and collided with Jones' car, pinning him beneath it, was high on a mixture of marijuana, methadone and other drugs at the time of the crash.

He pleaded guilty to several charges but contested that his intoxication caused Jones' death. Cepparulo in November found Budka guilty, and his sentencing was postponed until this week.

In court Tuesday, Jones' friend and coworker, Middletown Detective Jeffrey Sproehnle, read aloud a statement written by Jones' wife, Suzanne, who was in the courtroom but did not speak.

"Christopher Jones was an amazing husband to me and a devoted father to our three children," the letter began.

She talked about the plans she and her husband had for the future, including watching their children grow then retiring together in a cozy Lancaster County home with a wraparound porch where they could watch the sunsets together.

"Every couple has hopes and dreams. Ours have been shattered by one man's selfish addiction," she wrote.

Jones' children, Christopher, 17, and Julianne, 14, stood before the judge and read statements. Sproehnle read a letter by Jones' youngest son, Brendan, 12.

"My dad was the best dad any kid could ask for," Christopher Jones Jr. read. "I cannot explain the sadness in my heart when I know he is not coming home."

The children's statements brought many in the audience to tears.

Middletown Director of Public Safety Patrick McGinty called Jones "a special young man, a special police officer" who was well loved in the department for his compassion and sense of humor.

McGinty said that love was evident last month, when the department tried to organize a small memorial on the anniversary of Jones' death.

Word got out, and the event swelled to a gathering of more than 200 people.

Among those who sent condolences after Jones' death were many of the people he came in contact with while patrolling Middletown's streets, McGinty said.

"Whether they were a victim or a suspect, he never turned a deaf ear. Chris Jones was a young man we were all proud to have known and worked with, and he will never be forgotten," McGinty said.

In their statements, Jones' family members wrote about struggling to mourn Jones amid the media frenzy surrounding his death. They said that many people stare at them when they're out in public or ask them questions.

They asked for privacy, a message that Cepparulo echoed.

"While people mean well, they are constantly reminding this family about Detective Jones' death. This is upsetting to them. I ask the public to be aware that this family would like their privacy," he said.

The sentence Cepparulo imposed exceeded the mandatory minimum of three to six years for homicide by vehicle while DUI.

Budka's attorney, Barnaby Wittels, argued for a lighter sentence, saying his client has a history of mental and physical health problems that led to his drug abuse. He said Budka was filled with remorse about what he did.

"This is a man with a conscience, a man who will suffer every day of his life," Wittels said.

The defense lawyer reminded the judge that the slaying wasn't intentional, saying a "cruel twist of fate" caused Budka to cause Jones' death.

But Chief Deputy District Attorney Robert James argued that fate didn't have anything to do with it.

He said Budka was a habitual marijuana smoker and cocaine user who had been warned by his doctors and others to stop mixing illegal drugs and alcohol with the methadone he was prescribed to curb his drug addiction.

James reminded the judge that police found a hidden compartment in Budka's car for drugs and paraphernalia, indicating that he often ingested drugs while driving. And he said Budka's apartment was strewn with drugs and paraphernalia.

The prosecutor said Budka's health problems were no excuse.

"Many people deal with health issues. They still go to work every day. They don't sit in their apartments and smoke marijuana, and then take to the roads and kill police officers," James said.

Budka has two prior offenses, one DUI and one drug offense, both from other states.

Cepparulo ruled that a prison official or probation officer must monitor Budka every year on Jan. 29 to make sure he reads every victim letter in the court file. The number of letters wasn't mentioned in court Tuesday.

"This was a totally avoidable accident," the judge told Budka. "Had you not consumed drugs, had you paid attention while driving, this tragedy would not have happened."

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