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Marple man gets probation in voter fraud case

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Bruce Leland Bartman

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MEDIA COURTHOUSE >> A Marple man who returned an absentee ballot on behalf of his dead mother in the 2020 General Election said he got caught up in “propaganda” after pleading guilty Friday to two counts of perjury, a third-degree felony, and one count of unlawful voting, a first-degree misdemeanor.

“I made a mistake,” Bruce Leland Bartman, 70, of the100 block of Overlook Drive, told Common Pleas Court Judge George Pagano. “I was isolated last year with the lockdown, listened to too much propaganda, and just got frustrated and lost it and made a stupid mistake.”

Bartman, a registered Republican, was sentenced to five years of probation for each count, running concurrently, under a negotiated guilty plea worked out by Deputy District Attorney Douglas Rhoads and defense counsel Sam Stretton. Bartman will also not be eligible to vote until April 30, 2024, under state law.

“While today marks the end of this troubling criminal case, it is only the beginning of the journey for all Pennsylvanians as state government updates and reforms our voter systems,” said county District Attorney Jack Stollsteimer in a release. “This criminal investigation and prosecution by my office should serve as a roadmap for meaningful reform for the Pennsylvania Legislature and officials reviewing our voter systems.”

Stollsteimer previously said Bartman accessed the Pennsylvania online voter registration portal in August 2020 to register his mother, Elizabeth Bartman, who died in 2008, and mother-in-law, Elizabeth Weihman, who died in 2019, for the 2020 General Election.

Bartman was able to use his mother’s driver’s license number and the last four digits of his mother-in-law’s Social Security number as identifiers in the Pennsylvania system. In the case of Bartman’s mother, Stollsteimer said the system not only failed to catch the information as a registration from a deceased person, it actually uploaded information from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation database.

In Weihman’s case, Stollsteimer said a flag did go up in the system and a letter was automatically generated to the address submitting the registration asking for confirmation, as required by federal law, but that was just a form Bartman had to sign and return to the county election bureau. Upon receipt of that form, the county system automatically overrode the Social Security “master death file” hit and registered Weihman, Stollsteimer said.

Bartman then applied for and received an absentee ballot for his mother from the Delaware County Election Bureau, filled it out and returned it. That ballot was received Oct. 28 and counted Nov. 3 for Nether Providence’s 3rd Ward, Stollsteimer said. Bartman also voted in that same precinct, but did not ultimately submit an application for an absentee ballot or return a completed ballot for Weihman.

Stollsteimer said Bartman registered both deceased woman as Republicans in order to further the campaign of former Republican President Donald Trump, who lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

An affidavit of probable cause written by Delaware County Detective Robert Lythgoe indicates he confirmed both women were deceased and fellow county Detective Steven Bannar checked the North Providence Road address where the ballot had been sent, which appeared vacant.

Lythgoe and Bannar interviewed Bartman and his wife, Susan, on Nov. 13 after learning they were the registered property owners, according to the affidavit. Both denied any knowledge of registering either deceased woman to vote at that time, according to the affidavit, but Bartman confessed to

Bannar during a follow-up interview three days later.

Stretton said last year that the issue first came to light thanks to a New York Times investigative piece that compared registered voters to obituaries.

“As a result, they called Jack’s office,” said Stretton. “It wasn’t too hard to investigate. He used his own computer to do everything, so it wasn’t too hard to figure out after that.”

“Our office has done what it can to ensure our elections are both secure and accessible, but the next fight is in Harrisburg,” Stollsteimer said Friday. “To those reviewing voter systems, I say, ‘Remove failed systems, not ballot boxes.’ Rather than earning national attention for efforts to restrict accessibility to voting, address the breakdown in the online voter registration systems that this defendant exploited to vote for a deceased relative.”

Bartman has been free on $100,000 unsecured bail since his arrest in December. Stretton noted at Friday’s hearing that his client has a “true zero” prior arrest record, admitted wrongdoing right away and cooperated with authorities, waived a preliminary hearing and advised the commonwealth that he intended to plead guilty.

“This is what you call misguided political dissent in a very stupid fashion,” Stretton told the judge Friday.

Stretton said he has known Bartman for many years and that he has always been involved in his community. Bartman, a former salesman, is currently caring for his disabled wife, Stretton said.

“I apologize sincerely and I just wish you would allow me to be able to take care of my wife,” Bartman told Judge Pagano. “She needs my help.”

Pagano said he believed Bartman was sincerely remorseful, but said he took the case very seriously because it goes to the very heart of democracy.

In addition to probation, Bartman was ordered to provide a DNA sample to state police. Stretton indicated he will also not be able to serve on a jury.

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