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Felon pleads guilty to illegally registering to vote in 2008 election

Mark Bowes

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A drug felon was sentenced to time already served Monday after pleading guilty to an offense related to lying about her felony conviction on a voter registration form she signed before the 2008 election.

Sheila J. Peterson, 53, who was convicted in 1993 of possession of cocaine, pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice — reduced from a felony count of making a false statement on an election form.

Chesterfield County Circuit Judge Frederick G. Rockwell III sentenced her to time served after Peterson spent 12 days in jail for failing a court-ordered screening that showed evidence of cocaine.

The prosecution recommended a sentence of 90 days with all 90 suspended because Peterson already had served more time than what had been agreed upon in her original plea deal.

When Peterson originally appeared for trial July 9, Rockwell became skeptical of Peterson's ability to understand what she was pleading guilty to and under what circumstances when he asked her several standard questions about her case.

Peterson seemed incoherent and unable to comprehend the questions after pleading to the charge. She was to have been sentenced to serve four days in jail.

Rockwell ordered that she immediately be screened for drugs and the test came back positive for cocaine. The judge revoked her bail and sent her to jail pending Monday's proceedings.

On Monday, Peterson was articulate and alert. "Great lesson — seriously," she told the judge after declaring she felt "wonderful."

"I don't hear that often," replied Rockwell, who later added, "This is so much better than the last time we chatted."

In a summary of facts, Chief Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney Kenneth Nickels said Peterson had signed a voter registration form on Oct. 3, 2008, in which someone had checked a box that signified Peterson was not a felon. It was unclear whether Peterson filled out the form or someone did it for her.

Defense attorney Louise Moore told the court Peterson believed that election officials would reject her registration form and deny her a voter identification card if they discovered a problem in vetting her application.

After the hearing, Moore said Peterson had been encouraged to register by a group that was soliciting people outside a grocery store. Moore said Peterson didn't advise what group was conducting the voter registration drive.

Election officials didn't immediately discover Peterson's ineligibility to vote and she was allowed to cast a ballot.

Peterson is one of at least 40 people who have been charged so far as part of a state police probe of voter registration irregularities from the 2008 general election. State police reviewed 400-plus complaints forwarded to the agency for investigation in October 2008, before the November election, by Nancy Rodrigues, the state Board of Elections secretary at the time.

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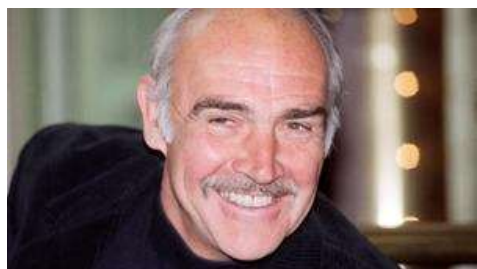
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