

REGIONAL NEWS

Man: I killed my hunting buddy

Thomas Calescibetta Jr., of Port Byron, tells how he fired the fatal shotgun blast.

By John Stith
Staff writer

A Port Byron man admitted Tuesday in Cayuga County Court to killing a hunting companion last December.

Thomas Calescibetta Jr., 40, of 8386 West Loop Road, pleaded guilty to criminally negligent homicide, a felony punishable by up to four years in state prison.

"I pulled the trigger and saw my friend die," he told the court during his plea.

The Port Byron man was the key witness for the prosecution in the murder trial of Thomas Bianco, accused in the 1981 killing of Julie Monson, of Auburn. Bianco was convicted, but the conviction was overturned in 1993, and the case remains open.

Calescibetta shot Jerry Sylvester, 43, of 7805 State Street Road, Throop, with a 12-gauge shotgun. The two were hunting Dec. 9, the last day of deer-hunting season, on Sylvester's property, when Calescibetta accidentally shot his friend about 8:20 a.m.

Calescibetta ran to Sylvester's house and called 911. Sylvester was pronounced dead at the scene.

Sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 4. A plea agreement with the district attorney's office calls for the Port Byron man to be sentenced to shock probation, which includes six months in a military-style boot camp program; weekends in jail; or home detention.

Calescibetta works as a truck driver, and Judge Mark H. Fandrich said he is leaning toward a sentence that would not interfere with Calescibetta's job.

Calescibetta described for Fandrich how Sylvester was killed.

"I was driving deer toward Jerry Sylvester," Calescibetta said, "and I came upon what I thought was a deer. I should have been more careful identifying my target."

Calescibetta sat with his lawyer, James Leone, and wept as District Attorney James B. Vargason questioned him about the incident. Calescibetta and Sylvester were frequent hunting partners; Calescibetta said he shot Sylvester from a distance of 60 to 65 yards.

"Prior to pulling the trigger, you did not confirm what your target was," Vargason said.

Leone told Fandrich that Calescibetta decided to withdraw the innocent plea he entered at his arraignment Aug. 23.

Leone said the incident was "a most unfortunate and tragic situation," for both the Sylvester and Calescibetta families.

In the 1980s, Calescibetta testified for the prosecution that Bianco, a local auto body shop owner, admitted killing Monson. Calescibetta later recanted his testimony. Bianco was convicted in 1986, but that conviction was overturned in 1993.

During a 1991 hearing on the Bianco case, two Cayuga County jail inmates said they heard Calescibetta say that he and two other Auburn residents had killed Monson. No charges were filed against Calescibetta or the two other Auburn men in the slaying.

Monson was last seen Sept. 27, 1981, when she got into the car of an unidentified man on Prospect Street in Auburn. Monson was heading to her home on Genesee Street after an evening of drinking with friends at the Stockade bar in Sennett when the man apparently signaled her to stop.

Her remains were found 18 months later in a weedy swamp at the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, about 75 feet from the Thruway. She had been stabbed at least five times in the chest, police said.

Fulton student accused of taking handgun

Officials look into reports that the weapon was brought to high school.

By Delen Goldberg
Staff writer

Police are investigating reports from Fulton high school students that a junior brought a handgun to school.

State police have charged the 16-year-old boy with stealing the gun from the home of a Volney town councilor. City police are investigating whether he brought it to school. State police have jurisdiction over Volney. City police watch over Fulton, where G. Ray Bodley High School is located.

John Keith, 16, of 4039 Underbrush Trail, Clay, was charged Tuesday with grand larceny of a firearm, a felony, and criminal possession of a weapon, a misdemeanor.

Fulton and state police began investigating Keith on Monday night after officers received reports that he brought the gun to

school, investigators said.

"He had shown it to some students at school a couple of weeks ago," state police Investigator Lyle Baxter said. "The kids just (recently) started coming out with information."

Fulton schools Superintendent Michael Egan said Tuesday that students approached high school officials Monday afternoon about a student bringing a gun to school.

State police investigators said Keith stole the gun from the home of Gregory Hartranft, a Volney town councilor. Keith is friends with Hartranft's 15-year-old son.

Keith attended school in Fulton but lived in Clay, where his family moved in 2003. The Keiths are buying another home in Fulton, so their son stayed in the Fulton school district, Hartranft said.

Keith caught the school bus every morning from the Hartranft home, Gregory Hartranft said Tuesday. Keith's father dropped his son off at the house on his way to work in Scriba.

While Hartranft's son got ready for school, Keith waited in the house, Gregory Hartranft said. Both he and his wife left for work each morning about 6 a.m., more than 20 minutes before Keith arrived.

Hartranft said he hid his gun, a .22 semiautomatic pistol, in his bedroom dresser drawer. He noticed it was missing about a week and a half ago but thought he had misplaced it. He didn't call police, he said, because he didn't suspect it had been stolen.

Monday night, at a sports banquet for Fulton high school athletes, Hartranft heard rumors that Keith was being investigated for bringing a handgun to school. Hartranft immediately called state police, he said.

"It makes you feel violated," he said of the theft. "I opened my door, opened my house to this kid, fed him, gave him the run of the house, and to have him turn around and do this to us is just awful."

"And I haven't heard a word from his parents," Hartranft

added. "That's what really hurts."

Keith's father, John W. Keith, would not discuss the case against his son Thursday. "The investigation is going on, and other than that, we have no comment," he said.

Both Egan and Fulton police Chief Mark Spawn praised the students who reported a gun was brought into the school.

"This is a situation of students looking out for students," Spawn said. "The students are to be commended for what they did."

Egan refused to identify the boy in question, citing student confidentiality, but said the school district's investigation has targeted a single student.

"At this point, we don't know whether the gun was actually on school property or not," Egan said. "That's part of what the investigation is right now."

Egan said school officials contacted police Tuesday morning to report what they had heard from students, but police already had started investigating.

"It was reported as something that had happened in the past, more than three weeks ago," Egan said, explaining why school officials chose not to call authorities sooner. "We were in the process of trying to contact the police (Tuesday) morning, when we found out they were investigating it."

Egan said the boy has been suspended from school until the investigation is over. If the allegations are true, Egan said, the boy could face a one-year suspension.

"This is a very serious breach of the code of conduct," he said.

Investigators said Keith never threatened any students with the gun, which was not loaded.

"He said he needed it for some kind of protection, but not from anyone in school," Baxter said.

Keith was issued an appearance ticket and is scheduled to answer to the charges Nov. 29 in Volney Town Court.

Mourning bunting raised at firehouse

MOURNING, FROM PAGE B-1
house when they arrived.

Hunt was treated for smoke inhalation at the scene, Unaitis said.

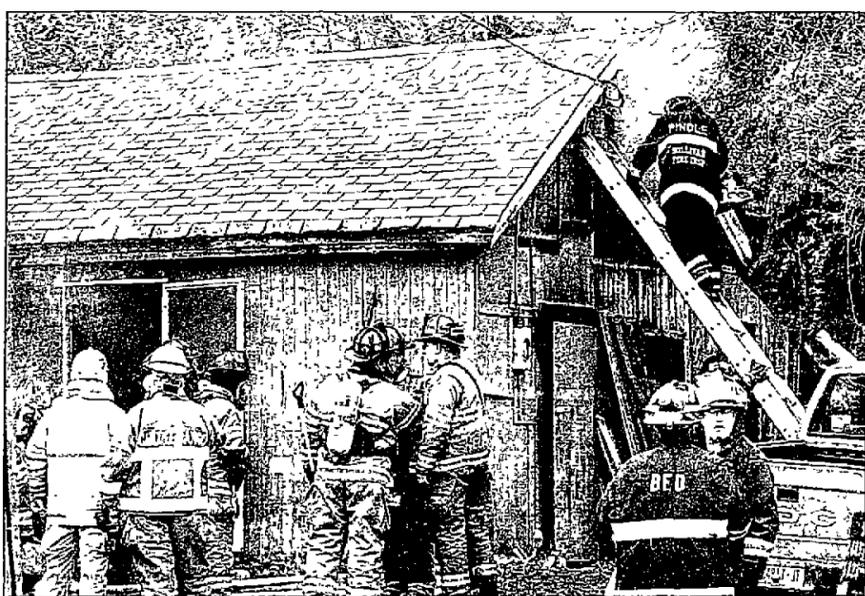
"He should definitely be commended for trying to rescue a civilian," Sudol said.

In his 21 years with the department, the chief said he couldn't recall losing anyone in a fire.

"We never lost a firefighter ever," Sudol said.

At 2 p.m., firefighters used a ladder truck to put black bunting on the fire hall in memory of Shetler.

Firefighter Wayne Miller mentioned the March 7, 2002, blaze in Pompey that killed two local firefighters, John "Gino" Ginocchetti of the Manlius department and Timothy "T.J."



Al Campanie / Staff photographer

SMOKE IS still in the air outside 126 W. Genesee St., Chittenango, Tuesday morning after his fellow firefighters found Jeff Shetler alone inside the burning house. Shetler, 18, who died from the fire, had recently joined the fire department.

Lynch of the Fayetteville department.

"You read about it all the time," Miller said, his voice trailing off.

Emotions ran high at the fire hall as Miller and others remembered Shetler.

"He just knew what he wanted in life and he went for it," Jason Baker said.

Baker, 25, went through the 100-hour state firefighter training with Shetler. The two studied together and had a competition to see who could answer the

most fire calls, Baker said.

"We have a special bond between us," Baker said.

"He would give his heart to anyone," Amber Lyman, a friend, said. "He would do anything for anyone."

Atkins helped unseat friend

ATKINS, FROM PAGE B-1

at the side of Republican Melody Holmes when she ran for the Common Council seat held by Atkins, a Democratic incumbent who would lose in the primary with Seals.

When Onondaga County Republican Chairman Bob Smith backed Tom Dadey against Hoffmann in this year's Republican primary, he pointed to her loyalty to Atkins as proof that Hoffmann remained a Democrat at heart.

Yet Atkins — as the city's Democratic chair — could hardly refuse to help Valesky in the highly charged Senate race.

"I'm true to the Democratic process," Atkins said.

During the weeks when Valesky and Hoffmann went head to head, Atkins said, he wouldn't join in harsh personal attacks.

Instead, Atkins said, he grew to admire Valesky as a passionate champion for changing a broken and encrusted system in Albany.

"The issues are inequality and disenfranchisement," Atkins said, speaking of the political needs of struggling neighborhoods in Syracuse. He described conditions in some parts of the South Side as akin to "Third World countries," and he said the state has failed to adequately educate the children who need it most.

To Atkins, Valesky seems conscious of those realities.

Still, Atkins wondered Tuesday about some might-have-beens. Hoffmann built a reputation as a fierce and committed Democrat before she jumped to



File photo / Tim Reese, 1992

STATE SEN. Nancy Lorraine Hoffmann talks with Mike Atkins at a Democratic fund-raiser in October 1992 at Rosie O'Grady's restaurant in Syracuse.

the ruling Republicans. Now the Democrats are edging closer to seizing control of the Senate, which left Atkins sounding wistful about what Hoffmann might have accomplished, if she'd never switched.

"No question about it," Atkins said. "With the compassion and expertise she developed in the Senate, if we still had that kind of tenacity..."

He left the sentence unfinished, although you know what he was thinking: Hoffmann was smart. She was photogenic. She was capable of being politically folksy or ruthless, as required. All those abilities, as a Democrat, might have lifted her into a place of statewide power.

Instead, Valesky seized the moment and will go to Albany.

Atkins expects his friendship with Hoffmann will again survive the turbulence of an election. Over the past few months, he'd occasionally see her during the campaign, often when Valesky was at Atkins' side.

"She'd always greet me," Atkins said, "and she always understood."

He described Hoffmann as tough and shrewd, a woman with much to offer to Central New York. Then he recalled how it felt when he lost a year ago, and how everything turned around in 12 short months.

"She'll get over this," Atkins said, "and she'll be back."

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. His columns appear Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Call him at 470-6015 or e-mail him at citynews@syracuse.com.

Man admits 1987 slaying

The Associated Press

Utica — A man accused of killing a female horse groom who was found hanged at the Vernon Downs racetrack 17 years ago pleaded guilty Tuesday to lesser charges in her death.

Robert Hayes, 40, was charged with second-degree murder in the death of Leslie Dickenson, 38. Hayes pleaded guilty to a reduced first-degree manslaughter charge during his second day of trial.

Dickenson's body was found Aug. 15, 1987, leaning against the wall of her living quarters at the harness racetrack, with an electrical extension cord knotted around her neck and tied to an overhead shelf.

Hayes told a judge that he was high on drugs the night of Dickenson's death when he went to her room to ask for money. Hayes said he punched her in the eye when she tried to stop him from taking money off her refrigerator.

Hayes panicked when Dickenson was knocked out and tried to make her death look like a suicide by tying the cord around her neck and cutting her throat and wrist with an electric carving knife. Hayes also tried to start a fire in her room.

Dickenson's death was ruled a suicide until the case reopened in 1990, when prosecutors uncovered new evidence and exhumed Dickenson's body.

Last year, prosecutors charged Hayes, a fellow groom, in Dickenson's death. He was arrested in Holmes County, Miss., where he had been living and working.

Kayak park urged in Auburn

Randy Daniels, New York's secretary of state, supports idea during visit to city.

By Dave Tobin
Staff writer

Flanked by kayakers in Auburn's City Council chambers, New York's Secretary of State Randy Daniels talked about dreams Tuesday.

He was speaking about Auburn planners' dream for making the Owasco Outlet through Auburn a kayak park.

"This exemplifies the type of project we'd like to encourage all over New York state," Daniels said.

Before the day was out, Daniels told city officials he was making a "preliminary decision to provide funding" for the kayak park project. He didn't say how much.

City planners have submitted a grant application seeking \$250,000 to develop the park along the waterway. The plan would place boulders in the waterway to create rapids for an Olympic-class, white-water kayak run. Loop Road from Genesee Street to North Street would be reduced from four lanes to three, so the south bank of the waterway could be widened and terraced. A new walkway would be canclevered over the waterway's north bank, and a kayak takeout would be built off Garden Street, near the Health Central parking lot. Market Street Park would be upgraded.

In 2002, Daniels' office granted the city \$90,000 to develop the plan.

Steve Lynch, Auburn city planner, said the city would be ready to begin construction next spring.

Art Miller, a kayaking consultant for the project, said a kayaking course could help attract national-level kayaking competitions, like the Junior National Olympics. Currently, there are two Olympic-level kayaking courses in the state, he said — one in Penn Yan, which he helped design, and one in the Catskills, near Woodstock.

"We'll bring Olympians into town to help with the coaching," he said.

Competitive kayaking courses are like ski slalom courses, with kayakers paddling around temporary gates. The courses typically run 900 feet, which is usually traversed in about 90 seconds, he said.

Miller said the waterway's improvements would benefit more than kayakers.

"By creating the white-water course, we'll create faster water and we'll create eddies," he said. "That's where your fish are going to hang out."