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Stanton County Principal Found Guilty of Arson

A school principal was mentally ill when he entered his estranged wife's home in Olathe, took purses and burned her car — but how mentally ill?

Johnson County jurors decided on Friday that his actions did not meet the extreme threshold for a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity.

Jurors found Craig Butler, 36, guilty of arson and criminal damage to property for the crimes on Aug. 24 and Aug. 25, 2008. They found him not guilty on a charge of aggravated burglary.

To be found not guilty and sent to state mental care, Butler had to be so mentally ill at the time that he could not have intended to commit the crimes.

In closing arguments, assistant prosecutor Michael McElhinney said, "All three doctors agree he had the intent ..."

Defense lawyer Paul Morrison countered that the doctors also agreed "He was so psychotic at the time he committed this crime he didn't know up from down."

Butler was hallucinating and hearing voices from the "Chronicles of Narnia" characters when he entered the home while his wife, Tracy Butler, and another woman were there, the defense contended.

At the time, the former science teacher in the Shawnee Mission School District was an assistant principal at Rosedale Middle School in Kansas City, Kan.

He had started experiencing psychotic symptoms, witnesses said, and Butler testified that he got an anti-depressant medication from a co-worker and took it. The medication was the wrong drug for his condition and sent him into mania, the defense contended.

He entered the house in the 600 block of South Grant, did about $1,000 damage to furniture, dishes and electronics, took some purses and then burned the car and his legs.

He dumped the purses alongside a road in Lawrence and later he and a lawyer mailed them back to the owners.

He resigned from his assistant principal job in September 2008, got treatment and took a job in August 2009 as principal of Stanton County High School in western Kansas. An attorney for the school district there has said they were not aware of the criminal charges when they hired him. He was suspended from that job in April pending the outcome of the trial, and he is now divorced.

Morrison asked mercy for his client.

“This is about a man’s life. This is about whether you decide to stamp him as a burglar, stamp him as an arsonist,” he said.

McElhinney countered, “He’s already branded himself,” and he asked jurors to hold Butler responsible for his actions.

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