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Man pleads guilty to killings of pregnant woman, toddler

'I knew she wasn't going to wake up,' he said in hearing

BY EMILY CUTTS
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Just feet away from the man who admitted to killing them, the smiling faces of Keona Sade Foote, 23, and her daughter, 2-year-old Miyona Zayla Lee-Miller, looked up at Foote's mother from a larger-than-life-sized photo.

On Thursday, 30-year-old Renard Carter pleaded guilty in Olmsted County District Court to second-degree murder, second-degree murder with intent, and second-degree murder of an unborn child.

Foote and Miyona were found dead on Sept. 13, 2020, in their home at Olympik Village Apartments, at 402 31st St. NE in Rochester.

Carter testified Thursday that on Sept. 10, he forced Foote to put her hands around Miyona's neck and then placed his hands over hers and applied pressure until the toddler died. He said he then forced Foote to place a phone charging cord around her own neck and tighten it before he himself tightened it further.

Multiple videos of the killings were recorded by Carter and posted to social media.

"I took a shower. She was still breathing, and I left," he said of leaving Foote to die in the apartment. "I knew she wasn't going to wake up."

Before Carter killed Foote, who was in her first trimester of pregnancy, he said she had confronted him about his infidelity. Carter claimed in court that Foote made a remark about their

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Photos by Joe Ahlquist / jahlquist@postbulletin.com

Josephine Sauder (front), 14, of Pine Island, takes part in a showmanship class of the 4-H Dairy Show during the Dodge County Free Fair on Thursday in Kasson.

Back in the barn

4-H, FFA shows return in person at Dodge County Fair

BY ALEXANDER DACY
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KASSON

The dairy cows paraded around the barn one after another, the wood chips rustling under their hooves in the makeshift show arena. Some were babies; some were larger than their handlers.

The crowd of about 100 quietly observed each pattern, curve and movement for more than three hours as a judge screened each bovine.

The moos, bleats and oinks of nearby animals in the warm barn were only broken by quiet, golf-like applause from the audience when a Dodge County Dairy Princess stepped forward to bestow each cow and showperson with a ribbon.

What seemed mundane at the Dodge County Fairgrounds on Thursday was a welcome sight to members of 4-H and FFA. The competitions — a highlight of county fairs for decades



A showmanship class takes place during the 4-H Dairy Show during the Dodge County Free Fair on Thursday in Kasson.

— returned to full, in-person shows for 2021, providing a sense of order after a chaotic past year and a half.

"It was really nice to have stuff back to normal," said Josephine Sauder, who's been showing for 11 years. "It's just nice to see people again and have the barns full of animals."

The COVID-19 pandemic forced 2020's shows to be held virtually or in person

with limited attendance. The virtual shows involved entrants submitting photos and videos of them showing their animals.

The format was not well-liked, and Buck Oeltjenbruns is among those glad to return to a more typical show.

"It was a lot different. It was just, walk around the yard, take a few pictures, and that was it," said Oeltjenbruns, who showed his milk cow

virtually last year. "It's so much better [to be back]."

On Thursday, Oeltjenbruns — who's been showing for 12 years — presented Scarlet, a friendly brown-and-white marbled behemoth who's headed to the Minnesota State Fair at the end of August.

Sauder, who won the intermediate showmanship competition, is also headed to Falcon Heights with her cow, and she could be showing sheep, swine and rabbits there, too.

Both said they will continue to work with their animals to get them fit for the state's top competition.

Diego Espinoza will also join them at the state fair. He's been showing for seven years, and he'll make a return trip to Falcon Heights with Sapphire.

Espinoza said the other two cows he showed didn't do as well as he would've liked, but he enjoyed being back in the barn.

"There's a lot more people, so it's a lot more fun," he said.

New superintendent faces tension-filled meeting

BY MATTHEW STOLLE
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Rochester Public Schools interim superintendent Kent Pekel headed into his inaugural school board meeting Tuesday as the district's leader with every reason to believe that it would be drama-free. There was nothing remotely controversial in the agenda that the board was expected to address that night.

It was anything but. Instead, Pekel and the school board were confronted with a raucous, occasionally angry and jeering group of people venting a range of complaints and criticisms.

The gist of those complaints focused on critical race theory, which Rochester Public Schools does not teach. But

they also directed their ire against mandatory mask wearing and a recently passed board resolution classifying statements such as "Black Lives Matter" and "Stop Asian Hate" as "government speech."

In a meeting with the Post Bulletin editorial board on Thursday, Pekel said he was OK with people expressing their opinions, but raised concerns about the "tenor and tone" of some of the commentary. It wasn't clear whether the attendees were parents of students in the district, though they do have a right to comment publicly, he said.

"There were people who were angry and very concerned, but not carrying signs that, for instance, had a swastika on it. And then there were other

people who were expressing their concerns in a way that (the PB reported) were traumatizing and triggering to some other people in the room," Pekel said.

He said the district needs to find a way to explain to the public what is being taught in its schools. But the challenge of Tuesday's meeting was disproving the group's insistence that critical race theory is being taught in Rochester schools when it isn't.

Critical race theory is an area of legal scholarship that seeks to examine U.S. law as it intersects with issues of race. But critics see it as Marxist theory that divides people into "oppressors" and "oppressed."

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Joe Ahlquist / jahlquist@postbulletin.com

Rochester Public Schools Interim Superintendent Kent Pekel looks on during a School Board meeting Tuesday at the school district's Edison Administration Building. A group of people opposed to critical race theory and masking to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 filled the audience during the public comment portion of the meeting.

Opponents petition against off-highway vehicle park

BY JOHN MOLSEED
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HOUSTON — Opponents of a planned off-highway vehicle park in Houston presented the city council with a petition of more than 400 signatures from residents, business owners and land owners Monday.

However, if the city pulls out of the agreement, staff from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources say they'll ask the city for about \$516,000 to repay grants and land acquisition costs should the city pull out of the planned park.

The land acquired by the city — with

help from those grants — adjacent to South Park south of Houston would revert to state ownership, DNR staff told city council members.

That would leave the city without an asset to help pay those costs.

Michelle Quinn, city administrator, said the city's entire tax levy as of 2021 is about \$537,000, and that the city does not have the capacity to bond for the funds.

Opposition to the project has grown as it enters its final phases. Public comment for the project closed a year ago. However, opponents say they hadn't heard about plans for the park until recently.

Opponents say the park, which would accommodate full-size vehicles on portions of 7.5 miles of roads and trails on the bluff south of town, would be noisy, lead to erosion, and hurt a fragile ecosystem while providing negligible economic benefit.

The council asked the group of opponents to form a four-member committee to work with the city to help negotiate with the DNR.

For now, the project is tentatively moving forward with a sound study on the bluff that will be conducted before the fall. The study is a prerequisite for constructing the

park. An open house with DNR officials is scheduled for Aug. 10.

Area recreational vehicle clubs would be responsible for regular maintenance of the park. An archaeological study of the site, another prerequisite before construction, has been shelved, pending funding for the study.

Planning for the off-highway vehicle park began around 2008 through 2010. Federal grants and matching funds from the DNR have paid to acquire bluff land adjacent to South Park south of Houston. In 2013, the South Park land use plan was amended to allow motor vehicle traffic.

Meeting

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“What was interesting was the passionate thrust of the conversation, (which) was: It's your job, the school district, to prove to us you are not teaching critical race theory. And I'm like, 'Wait. You're walking in with the accusation that we're actually teaching critical race theory.' And there was no sense that it was their responsibility to have any evidence that we're actually doing it,” Pekel said.

He said the district is committed to equity, defined as meaning that every RPS student is challenged academically and cared about. Equity is a concept that often enrages conservatives, because they believe it is used to displace equality. But Pekel said equity means taking a holistic approach with every student.

“Doing that requires differentiating across lines of race and culture,” he said. “We're not blind to race and culture ... We all have other parts of our identity, not just our race. So to reach a kid who's a developing human being, it requires being attentive to the whole person.”

Pekel said Tuesday's meeting did get a “little statewide attention.” He said he was on call with the state's education commissioner and

other superintendents, and the commissioner brought up the Rochester meeting three times. But Rochester is not alone in encountering such tempestuous meetings.

“We definitely have had other districts have board meetings with similar types of public comment, experiences,” he said.

Asked if there would be new rules governing future meetings, Pekel said he didn't know, but that discussions were focused on the issue. He said the decision not to televise the public comment portion of the meeting was a policy made years ago, long before Tuesday's meeting.

“It wasn't reaction to this criticism that (broadcasting) was not done,” he said. “And that's continuing to be our practice.”

Pekel said such meetings raise safety issues for him. One unidentified person came into the Edison Building meeting room with a rifle, but was told by a school resource officer that he couldn't bring a weapon into the room. The rifle-toting man complied.

“Thank God, he was somebody who did have respect for law enforcement, because he was immediately compliant,” Pekel said. “But he could have chosen not to be. So when I say maybe we should have recessed the meeting, I also know there's a safety issue that we need to be cognizant of.”

Minn. making progress in addressing vaccine equity

BY MATTHEW GUERRY
Forum News Service

ST. PAUL — COVID-19 vaccination rates among Black and Hispanic residents of Minnesota are improving, according to the state Department of Health, even as the overall pace of vaccinations slows.

The state has yet to achieve the feat of partially vaccinating 70% of residents older than 16, recent data show. But since May, Health Department Vaccine Equity Director Dr. Nathan Chomilo said, “the communities that have had, week over week, the largest increases in coverage gains have been our Black and Hispanic Minnesota communities.”

Improving vaccine access for Minnesota communities of color, as well as for residents with disabilities and poorer neighborhoods, is particularly important given the disproportionate toll the coronavirus pandemic has taken

on them. Non-white Minnesotans account for more instances of COVID-19 hospitalizations recorded in the state and more deaths.

The disparate effects of COVID-19 reflect long-standing barriers to health care that communities of color face, including transportation and language differences. That's why Minnesota's approach to closing the vaccine gap has focused on bringing doses to communities that need them rather than require members of those communities to travel for their shots.

By July 3, the most recent date for which data were available, 52.7% of Black residents and 57% of Hispanic residents had at least one shot.

Minnesota's American Indian, Asian and Pacific Islander communities have made similar strides but reported higher rates of vaccination than did their Black and Hispanic neighbors earlier in the pandemic.

Chomilo said vaccination events at churches, schools, barbershops and other easily accessible venues have helped to close the vaccine gap somewhat.

M Health Fairview has taken a similarly targeted approach to COVID-19 vaccinations in the Twin Cities area through its Minnesota Immunization Networking Initiative, or MINI.

MINI clinics offer walk-ins so that even passersby with spare time can take their COVID-19 shots, according to Dr. Ana Núñez, vice dean for diversity, equity and inclusion at University of Minnesota Medical School.

According to Núñez, vaccine equity must be continually improved in part to prevent more harmful COVID-19 variants from developing.

“Do we still have work to do? You bet,” she said.

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Murder

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unborn child and attempted to physically harm him.

“That's when I lost it,” he said. “I blacked out.”

At one point in the hearing, Foote's mother, Brandy Williams, left the courtroom sobbing. She watched the remainder of the hearing from a conference room via the Zoom hearing, which allowed others to attend remotely.

A sentencing date was not set at Thursday's hearing. Carter's \$5 million unconditional bail was revoked, and he is being held without bail until the sentencing hearing.

A sentencing recommendation was presented to the court

that would see Carter serve three consecutive sentences of 426 months, 326 months and 326 months. Combined, the sentences add up to just shy of 90 years.

In Minnesota, two-thirds of a state prison sentence is served in prison, and the remaining third, assuming a person incurs no additional time while serving their sentence, is served on supervised release. If Judge Lisa Hayne follows the recommendation, Carter would spend nearly 60 years in state prison.

To be charged with first-degree murder in Minnesota, a grand jury must indict the person. A conviction carries a mandatory life sentence. As a result of the ongoing COVID-19

pandemic, grand juries across the state had been unable to meet for months.

Olmsted County Attorney Mark Ostrem said his office was going to present the case to a grand jury Thursday for an indictment. Ostrem said his office was approached by Carter and his defense attorneys about a plea deal.

“It's really difficult to ever come up with an appropriate or satisfying disposition in this case,” Ostrem said, adding that it was important that the sentences represent all three victims. “If we were to have a life sentence, even though we could have gotten perhaps consecutive life sentences, we all know that a person can only live one life, so only one

of those sentences would have been served, and so in some fashion, the other two victims would have not completely been accounted for in the actual sanction, and so we felt like we are getting a representative sentence for all three victims. They're all been accounted for in this, and we are accomplishing what we had set out to accomplish to begin with.”

Rochester Police Capt. Casey Moilanen said in a statement that Foote's family, the community and the Rochester Police Department “will never forget the tragic murders of Miyona Miller, Keona Foote and her unborn child at the hands of Renard Carter.”

“There is no amount of prison time that will

erase the pain Carter has caused,” Moilanen said in the statement. “We hope that today's plea is a step forward in the healing process.”

Carter was arrested on Sept. 12 in South Carolina after police said he went there with plans to kill a former girlfriend. He was shot by law enforcement officers as they arrested him.

Police believed he had a gun, but it was later determined that it was a BB gun. He was briefly hospitalized for his injuries before he was returned to Rochester. The complaint also says he told medical workers that he wanted to be killed by police.

Carter was released from prison on April 22, 2020, after serving a sentence for felony domestic assault, the

criminal complaint states.

Weeks after her daughter and granddaughter's death, Williams told the Post Bulletin that Miyona was the joy of her daughter's life and that Foote did whatever she could as a mother to protect Miyona.

Foote and her daughter moved to Rochester on Sept. 1, and Foote enrolled in school before moving to Rochester with dreams of becoming an EMT. Williams said her daughter started classes to become a nursing assistant.

“They were angels, given to me for a little while,” Williams said in September. “I know and I believe 100% they are in heaven now. I take comfort and peace in knowing that.”

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