

Man linked to killing sentenced

By Michelle Starr
Staff writer

A man convicted of possession of a firearm that may have been used in a the shooting death of Brandon Pickinpaugh last year received two years probation on Thursday.

Dennis "Denny" Sciscoe, 20, pleaded no contest on Jan. 24 to reduced charges of possession of a firearm; original charges included accessory to a felony.

"I'm happy," Sciscoe said after sentencing. "That's all I can say."

Five years in prison is the maximum sentence for possession of a firearm.

Sciscoe's attorney, Steve Lefler, told Lancaster County District Court Judge Karen Flowers during the sentencing that Sciscoe only was helping his friends and did not have anything to do with the murder.

Pickinpaugh was murdered when a robbery went awry in the Van Dorn Plaza Shopping Center on Feb. 18, 1999.

The 17-year-old was shot once in the head when three men attempted to steal about three-fourths of a pound of marijuana and \$950 that Pickinpaugh had with him in the parking lot.

Pickinpaugh was found dead on the ground near the car he had been driving, police said.

Derek Graves, Jeremy Kurtzer and

Jedidiah Ngirchoimei, all of Lincoln, were arrested in connection with Pickinpaugh's death.

Graves, charged with first-degree murder and the alleged gunman, is in custody and awaiting trial in Lancaster County District Court.

In November, Ngirchoimei, originally charged with first-degree murder, posted a \$10,000 bond and is also awaiting trial in Lancaster County District Court.

Kurtzer posted 10 percent of a \$300,000 bond in October 1999 and is also charged in connection with the murder.

Tanner Andrews, Graves' roommate at the time of the murder, was arrested and given two years probation for possession of cocaine found in his apartment during a search for evidence connected to the murder.

Andrews was not connected to the murder.

Lefler said over the past year, he has gotten to know Sciscoe and is not only his attorney but his friend. Since Lefler began practicing law 24 years ago, he has never worked for someone with as much passion and potential as Sciscoe, Lefler said.

Sciscoe, who had been released on bond, lives with his mother in Omaha and attends Metropolitan Technical Community College in Omaha. He also has maintained employment.

Lefler said Sciscoe, though he was involved in previous incidents involv-

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Dennis "Denny" Sciscoe
Omaha man

ing police, has changed since the crime.

"Denny was a punk," Lefler said. "He's not a punk anymore. He holds a full-time job ... I think he has changed."

Sciscoe asked Judge Flowers to acknowledge his improvements and to trust him.

"I won't mess up again," Sciscoe said. "Please give me another chance."

Flowers said Sciscoe came close to severely messing up his life, especially considering his past.

"Punk is probably a nice word to describe the kid described in the police reports," Flowers said.

But Flowers also said she thought Sciscoe had made improvements and that she trusted him enough to put him on probation.

According to the terms of probation ordered by Flowers, Sciscoe has to maintain full-time employment or full-time-school and avoid social contact with people with criminal records.

Sciscoe cannot move out of Douglas County or leave the state without asking a probation officer,

unless it is work-related because his job often takes him to Iowa.

He cannot possess firearms or weapons, and law enforcement officers have the right to search his home or vehicle with or without a search warrant to look for weapons, Flowers said.

He cannot consume drugs or alcohol and cannot go into a bar when he's 21 years old. And because of prior drug use, he must get a drug and alcohol evaluation.

Depending on the outcome of the drug evaluation, Sciscoe might have to have regular drug tests, Flowers said.

Lefler said it was possible for the court to bring back the charges of accessory to a felony, and he was unaware of the number of years the court would be able to do this.

But Lefler said it would be unlikely unless Sciscoe did not follow his probation.

Flowers was positive about Sciscoe's future.

"There isn't a reason in the world you can't successfully complete this probation," Flowers said.

Woman to command cadet corps

■ One of the first women admitted to institute to be battalion commander.

LEXINGTON, Va. (AP) — It took 158 years to get women admitted to the Virginia Military Institute, but virtually no time at all for a female cadet to advance to a top leadership post.

Erin Nicole Claunch of Loudoun County, one of the women who broke VMI's gender barrier in 1997, will become one of the college's two battalion commanders this fall, leading half of the 1,200-member cadet corps during her senior year.

VMI officials said Claunch's selection for the second-highest military post in the student body had nothing to do with her gender.

The selection panel of VMI administrators and students thought she was the best-qualified candidate in terms of grades, leadership ability and physical fitness, school spokesman Mike Strickler said.

VMI Superintendent Josiah Bunting III said he was surprised that a woman was able to scale the ranks at VMI so quickly but not surprised that Claunch was the one to do it.

"She has really set the gold standard, not only for a female cadet but for any cadet at VMI," Bunting said.

Claunch, 20, is a physics major who is preparing for a career with the Air Force. She hopes to become an astronaut. She is the daughter of a retired Air Force major and is on the cross-country team.

"I hope that women can look at me and see that it's possible to accomplish things here, but that's not my primary goal," she said. "I want to do the job right and make sure my battalion is well-organized."

She ranks 15th academically in a class of 298 students.

The school requires cadets to do 60 sit-ups in two minutes, do five pull-ups and run 1½ miles in less than 12 minutes. Strickler said many women have trouble with the pull-ups because of the upper-body strength the exercises require.

Claunch beat the average score among all cadets, men and women. She was able to do 84 sit-ups and 15 pull-ups and ran the 1½ miles in 10 minutes and 43 seconds.

"I think it was just a matter of her being qualified for the job," said Justin Wood, 21, of Tazewell, a VMI senior and member of the nine-person selection committee.

VMI admitted women after the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the state-supported school either to accept female applicants or become a private institution. Women account for less than 5 percent of the student body.

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