

Houck found guilty of Crystal Rogers' murder, sentenced to life

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BOWLING GREEN—It took a jury around four hours on July 8 to reach a verdict in the case of Crystal Rogers, the Bardstown woman who went missing on July 3, 2015.

Brooks Houck, the former boyfriend of Rogers, was found guilty of murder and tampering with physical evidence. Joseph Lawson was found guilty of conspiracy to murder and tampering with physical evidence. The jury announced its decision at 1:37 p.m.

The jury recommended a life sentence for Houck, and 20 years for conspiracy to commit murder and five years for tampering with physical evidence for Lawson, to be served consecutively.

“Today, justice was delivered in a Bowling Green courtroom,” Kentucky Attorney General Russell Coleman posted on X. “Our Commonwealth never forgot Crystal Rogers, her children, and loved ones, Prosecutor Shane Young and law enforcement’s dedication to justice, coupled with the tenacity of the Rogers’ family, is the reason for this victory.”

The FBI Louisville Field Office released the following statement.

“The men and women of FBI Louisville officially began Operation Justice Rising in the fall of 2020. Five years later, after countless hours spent conducting numerous interviews and searches, analyzing evidence, collaborating with various FBI Headquarters entities, and coordinating with our federal, state, and local partners, we are proud of the pivotal role we played in seeking justice for Crystal Rogers and her family. We recognize today’s guilty verdicts would not have been possible without the exceptional efforts of our law enforcement partners at the Kentucky Office

of the Attorney General, United States Attorney’s Office-Western District of Kentucky, Kentucky State Police, Internal Revenue Service, Nelson County Sheriff’s Office, and the Bardstown Police Department. We hope this outcome brings some semblance of peace to Crystal’s family and the larger Bardstown community. The FBI will always stand with its partners to pursue justice no matter how long it takes.”

FAMILY STILL SEEKING ANSWERS

Members of Rogers’ family were in attendance, and were emotional and relieved once the verdict was rendered, but are still seeking answers about where Rogers’ body is and for Houck to admit he murdered her.

“I think Rosemary (Houck’s mother) and Nick (Houck’s brother) had something to do with it, and I think that will all come out within time,” Rogers’ daughter, Ashley Miller, told WKLY. She added that while this brought some closure, she still wishes “we could lay her to rest the way she needs to be.” Miller was 14 when her mother vanished.

“I do hope that will happen in time,” she added.

Houck, who was Rogers’ boyfriend and the father of one of her children, was a suspect from the beginning, but wasn’t charged until 2023. Despite extensive searches over the past 10 years, Rogers’ body has never been found.

Sherry Ballard, Crystal’s mother, posted on Facebook that the last couple of weeks “were some of the hardest days of my life,” and added that riding to Bowling Green every day then coming home every day mentally and physically exhausted “took a lot of getting used to.”

She also criticized the defense attorneys (“having to sit there and listen to someone defend the person

you knew murdered your family was sometimes more than I could take”) and thanked everyone for their support.

“I can’t say thank you enough to everyone in this community that stood by me and supported me through all these years,” she posted. “You are the pillars that kept me supported. I’m very blessed to live in a small town that comes together in events of tragedies.”

Lawson’s father, Steve Lawson, was found guilty of similar charges in May after jurors took just two hours to come to a verdict. He is scheduled to be formally sentenced on Aug. 6, but has already appealed.

NO BODY, NO PHYSICAL EVIDENCE OF MURDER, ATTORNEYS ARGUED

Attorneys for Houck and Lawson argued there was no physical evidence of a murder, with no body, crime scene, witness, or weapon after years of extensive searches. The prosecution relied heavily on cell phone data, explosive testimony incriminating the two, and discrepancies in Houck’s story.

The jury started deliberating on July 8 at 9:46 a.m., and at 11:48 a.m., they came back with a question, wanting to rewatch Charlie Girdley’s testimony. Girdley is the individual who claims he overheard Joseph Lawson talking about burying Crystal’s car with a skid steer.

On July 7, the ninth day of the trial, Joseph Lawson was quiet during the entire time of the closing arguments, only answering his attorney’s question about when he became paralyzed in 2021.

Day eight saw the defense reset at 3:29 p.m. after calling six witnesses, including retired LMPD Sgt. Denver Butler, whose testimony gave answers to what the FBI found in their most recent searches. In a search at Woodlawn Springs Subdivision at a property Houck was developing, the FBI dug up a driveway and porch, which turned up “items of interest.” Women’s underwear containing hair was

found underneath the driveway, and women’s clothing was found underneath the sidewalk. The items were sent for testing, and Rogers’ DNA was not found on any of the items. A search of the Houck Farm in October 2022 also did not produce any evidence of a crime scene or Rogers’ DNA.

The jury asked “how is blood or DNA evidence trace affected by rain, snow, fire, and time?” to which Butler responded, “Rain or snow would not get rid of that evidence, it may dissolve or disintegrate over time, but in a murder, a reasonable amount of it would be present.”

PSYCHOLOGIST SAID POLICE INVESTIGATION “MOST COERCIVE HE’S EVER SEEN”

Another witness called by the defense was cognitive psychologist Jeffrey Neuschatz, who testified that police interrogations with the two prosecution witnesses, Charlie Girdley and Heather Snellen, were manipulative and coercive, which Neuschatz claimed led the two to give false statements. He said the police interrogations were “the most coercive he’s ever seen.”

The commonwealth called Rick Sanders, police chief of the Jeffersontown Police Department, as a rebuttal witness, who testified that in his lengthy law enforcement career, he had never used the coercive police tactic “Reid Technique” while interrogating.

The defense also went through every search linked to the case that turned up no items of evidentiary value. These included searches of other farms/homes near the Houck property, a search of Houck’s home and truck, a search of his brother, Nick Houck’s police cruiser, Rogers’ car, and Anna Whiteside’s car.

During cross-examination, the prosecution pointed out that Girdley and Snellen both swore to tell the truth to the jury and argued that while on the stand, in a non-coercive environment, both individuals doubled down on their statements about Joseph and Steven Lawson’s

involvement in the disappearance of Rogers.

HOUCK’S MOTHER PRESENT, BUT BROTHER HASN’T BEEN SEEN

Present at the courthouse was Rosemary Houck, Brooks’ mother, who has been named numerous times during the trial and been referred to as a co-conspirator, although she hasn’t been charged.

Nick Houck, Brooks’ brother, has not been seen, but prosecutors also have claimed he’s involved.

In all, nearly 50 witnesses were called to the stand, including Rogers’ daughters, employees of Brooks Houck, his sister, Joseph Lawson’s grandmother, and the exes of Steve Lawson and Nick Houck. Steve Lawson, Joseph’s father, was found guilty of similar charges in May. It took jurors about two hours to make a decision.

OTHER UNSOLVED MURDERS

A year after Rogers went missing, her father, Tommy Ballard, was killed while hunting with his grandson, shot to death by a gun that, according to lead prosecutor Shane Young, was purchased from Nick Houck, who used a fake name during the sale.

In 2013, Bardstown Officer Jason Ellis was killed when he was ambushed on the Bluegrass Parkway while moving debris. In 2014, Kathy and Samantha Netherland were found murdered in their home.

Many believe these cases are related, especially those of Ballard and Ellis. Nelson County Sheriff Ramon Pinieroa has said they aren’t officially linked, but there are a lot of similarities. He also told WLKY that the search for Rogers’ body continues.

Houck’s defense attorneys were Steven Schroering and Brian Butler, while Kevin Coleman and Bobby Boyd represented Lawson. The lead prosecutor in the case was Shane Young.

Houck and Joseph Lawson’s sentencing hearing is Aug. 21. Both are expected to file appeals.

Wethington sentenced to 20 years

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Francis Kevin Wethington appeared in Marion Circuit Court Division 1 on July 10, where he was sentenced for his part in a case that involved his son, David Wethington.

Judge Todd Spalding sentenced Wethington, 59, of 200 Frogtown Road, to 10 years for promoting human trafficking (victim under 18 years of age), to run concurrent with 10 years for unlawful transaction with a minor (victim under 18 years of age). But since he was also charged with first-degree persistent felony offender, the sentence was enhanced to 20 years. He also received three years for first-degree possession of a controlled substance, third or greater offense (methamphetamine), and 12 months each for two counts of second-degree possession of a controlled substance, drug unspecified. He must also register as a lifetime sex offender.

Wethington was arrested twice in 2024, once on Oct. 2 for promoting human trafficking (victim under 18 years of age), first-degree unlawful transaction with a minor, illegal controlled substances, under 16 years of age, three counts of first-degree possession of a controlled substance, and two counts of first-degree persistent felony offender.

On March 7, he was arrested along with his son, David Wethington, 40, who was indicted in two separate cases by the Marion County Grand Jury on over 60 charges, including nine counts of first-degree unlawful transaction with a minor under 16 years of age, and 17 counts of third-degree rape. He was sentenced on June 26 to 20 years.

- Dustin Thompson had a pretrial conference set for Aug. 21 at 9:00 a.m. and a jury trial scheduled for Aug. 25 at 8:30 a.m. with motions in limine at 8:00 a.m. He is charged with first-degree wanton endangerment-police officer, first-degree fleeing or evading police (motor vehicle), first-degree fleeing or evading police (on foot), reckless driving, speeding 26 mph over/greater, improperly on the left side of the road, disregarding a stop sign, failure to wear seat belts, failure to improper signal, rear license not illuminated, improper start from a parked position, resisting arrest, menacing, possession of an open alcohol beverage container in a motor vehicle, attempted murder-police officer, second-degree assault-police officer, first-degree strangulation, disarming a police officer, and theft by unlawful taking or disposition-firearm.

On June 7, 2024, a KSP trooper, who was not identified, attempted to perform

a traffic stop on Clarktown Road in Nelson County at 12:10 a.m. When the trooper activated his emergency equipment, the vehicle, a 2012 Chevrolet Equinox driven by Thompson, did not stop, and the pursuit ensued into Marion County when Thompson turned onto Sulphur Lick Road in the Raywick area, which is a dead-end road.

Thompson exited his vehicle and fled on foot into a wooded area where the trooper pursued him. After a short pursuit, the trooper was able to catch up with Thompson, who then assaulted the trooper and fled. The trooper was treated and released from the hospital.

An arrest warrant for Thompson was obtained. He was located on June 7 and arrested.

- William G. Biggers was sentenced to five years for first-degree trafficking in a controlled substance, first offense (greater or equal to 2 grams of methamphetamine), trafficking in a controlled substance, first offense (fentanyl), trafficking in a controlled substance, first offense (heroin), trafficking in synthetic drugs, first offense, tampering with physical evidence, 12 months for drug paraphernalia-buy/possess, and 45 days for operating on a suspended/revoked operator’s license, all to run concurrent for five years.

He also has financial obligations set for a review on July 9, 2026, at 9:00 a.m.

- Angela Griffiths was sentenced to 3 years pretrial diverted for 5 years on an amended charge of theft by unlawful taking over \$1,000 and was ordered to repay restitution of \$2,411.77 jointly with co-defendant at the rate of \$100 a month beginning on Sept. 1.

- Cameron Hunt was sentenced to 2 years’ probated for 3 years on the charge of failure to comply with sex offender registration, first offense.

- Robby Johnson violated his probation with the use of controlled substances. The court imposed a 30-day sanction for the violation and ruled that he can be released from custody on Aug. 2 and return to probation.

- Gerald Settles violated his probation by using controlled substances, and the court will impose a sanction of credit for time served. He can be released from custody.

- David E. Shuck had obligations set for a review on Sept. 18 at 9:00 a.m. He can be released from custody and pay \$50 a month on restitution.

- Eric A. Smith failed to appear for a PSI interview and appeared in court late. A bench warrant was issued, and he was remanded into custody without bond. The

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Multiple individuals with sex-related charges appear in court

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Ten individuals charged with sex-related offenses appeared in front of Judge Kaelin Reed in Marion Circuit Court Division 2 on July 10.

- Justin Baron appeared via Zoom and pleaded not guilty to third-degree rape and had a pretrial conference set for Sept. 4 at 1:00 p.m. and a jury trial scheduled for Nov. 12 at 8:30 a.m.

- Joshua E. Miles is scheduled to enter a plea on July 24 at 1:00 p.m. He is charged with procuring or promoting the use of a minor by electronic means, and three counts of possession of matter portraying a sexual performance by a minor under 12 years of age.

- Karla Pendleton appeared via Zoom and pleaded not guilty to the charge of first-degree unlawful transaction with a minor, illegal sex act under 16 years of age. She has a pretrial conference set for Sept. 4 at 1:00 p.m. and a jury trial scheduled for Nov. 12 at 8:30 a.m.

- William R. Bowman pleaded not guilty to first-degree unlawful transaction with a minor, illegal sex act under 16 years of age, procuring or promoting the use of a minor by electronic means, and third-degree rape. He appeared via Zoom as he is lodged in the Marion County Detention Center. His bail was set at \$10,000 USB.

- Eric Philbeck, who is charged with five counts of first-degree sexual abuse, victim under 12 years of age, has not been served with an indictment and will close out as AP if not served.

- Brian Keith Wohner, who is lodged in the Marion County Detention Center on a \$150,000 bond, had mediation set for Sept. 12 at 11:30 a.m. at Taylor County. He is charged with two counts of first-degree rape, victim under 12 years of age, and two counts of first-degree sodomy, victim under 12 years of age.

- Terry Albertson pleaded not guilty and had a pretrial conference set for Sept. 4 at 1:00 p.m. and a jury trial scheduled for Nov. 12 at 8:30 a.m. The bond was set at \$1,000 USB.

- In the case of Brian T. Fowler, the court ruled that it is not inclined to rule on revocation until the resolution of an Adair County case. A review was set for Aug. 5 at 1:00 p.m.

16 years of age.

- Dylan Maupin pleaded not guilty to first-degree unlawful transaction with a minor, illegal sex act under 16 years of age, and first-degree sexual abuse. His bond was set at \$25,000 USB. He has a pretrial conference set for Sept. 4 at 1:00 p.m. and a jury trial scheduled for Nov. 12 at 8:30 a.m.

- Joshua E. Miles is scheduled to enter a plea on July 24 at 1:00 p.m. He is charged with procuring or promoting the use of a minor by electronic means, and three counts of possession of matter portraying a sexual performance by a minor under 12 years of age.

- Karla Pendleton appeared via Zoom and pleaded not guilty to the charge of first-degree unlawful transaction with a minor, illegal sex act under 16 years of age. She has a pretrial conference set for Sept. 4 at 1:00 p.m. and a jury trial scheduled for Nov. 12 at 8:30 a.m. The bond was set at \$10,000 USB.

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- John Joshua Blanford had a motion to modify granted, and he shall be placed in unsupervised/inactive probation status.

- Robert D. Chandler stipulated to violating his probation, and the court imposed a sanction of 180 days with credit for time served, and after the sanction, the probation will be complete.

- Bruce Clark has a pretrial conference set for Aug. 21 at 1:00 p.m. and was sentenced to five years to run concurrently with a Madison County charge. He is charged with first-degree possession of a controlled substance, first offense (methamphetamine), tampering with physical evidence, possession of marijuana, and license to be in possession.

- Alejandro T. Dewane pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 1 year pretrial diversion for 2 years for first-degree possession of a controlled substance, first offense (methamphetamine).

- Christina Fisher and Tonie Fisher pleaded guilty to knowingly exploiting an adult by person over \$300, and theft by unlawful taking or disposition all others \$10,000 but under \$1 million. They will be sentenced on Aug. 22 at 10:00 a.m.

- Elizabeth Isabelle violated her probation and was sanctioned to time served, and the probation concluded.

- Kevin McCandless had a probation revocation hearing set for July 24 at 12:30 p.m.. He also pleaded not guilty to first-degree possession of a controlled substance, third or greater offense (methamphetamine), failure of the owner to maintain required insurance/security, first offense, no tail lamps, rear license not illuminated, and improper registration. He has a pretrial conference set for Sept. 4 at 1:00 p.m. and a jury trial

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