

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Inmate gets lesson on mail etiquette

By Glenn May
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Friday, September 12, 2003

Allegheny County Jail inmate Demetrius "Meaty" Murrell should have double-checked Mondale Dupree's address before mailing Dupree a letter asking him to provide a phony alibi for a 2001 homicide.

The post office returned the incorrectly addressed letter to Murrell, guards read it, and in court Thursday so did prosecutor Thomas Merrick.

Murrell then pleaded guilty to third-degree murder and faces four to eight years in prison for killing a 19-year-old Lawrenceville man.

Murrell, 24, also of Lawrenceville, wrote to Dupree from jail earlier this year to tell him that he needed "a little alibi" for his upcoming trial before Common Pleas Judge David Cashman on charges he shot Earnest Stewart in a Hill District bar March 24, 2001.

"Really, I'm home free," Murrell wrote. "Or almost. I need you to come and say you were there and that you know it wasn't me."

Under jail rules, prisoners' outgoing mail is not opened and read by guards -- but incoming mail is. Murrell's letter asking Dupree to become a witness was read by guards when it was returned for having an incorrect address and insufficient postage.

In the letter, Murrell asked Dupree to tell the court that he saw a different man shoot Stewart at Todd's Bar on Centre Avenue.

"When they ask for a description, say dude was a lil' bit taller than me and he was darker," Murrell suggested.

In exchange for his guilty plea yesterday, Murrell will be sentenced to four to eight years in prison when he comes before Cashman for sentencing Thursday. Third-degree murder carries a maximum term of 40 years.

A judge dropped charges against Murrell for the Stewart shooting in 2002 amid an argument over a witness' statement. The District Attorney's Office then refiled the charges, and Merrick and defense lawyer Robert Mielnicki agreed to the plea deal shortly after Merrick read Murrell's letter.

"This was a case with many, many issues, and I think sometimes this is the way cases have to be resolved," Mielnicki said.

Merrick could not be reached for comment after the plea deal was struck.

Murrell wrote in his letter that if Dupree was willing to come forward with the alibi, he should contact Mielnicki, but not talk too much over the phone.

"Don't get into no details, cause them phones is suspect," Murrell wrote.

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