

Accused killer acquitted of murder

Amidst tears and expressions of disbelief from the victim's family, Avon resident Lisa F. Bunch was found not guilty this week of charges that she stabbed boyfriend Steven D. Gray during a heated argument last February.

Bunch could not contain joy upon hearing that she would get her first taste of freedom since her arrest more than eight months ago. A boisterous "Praise God!" escaped from her lips when the court clerk read the jury's decision on Thursday afternoon.

But Gray's family, seated on the opposite side of the courtroom, was visibly dismayed at the verdict.

"I just can't believe it," one family member was heard to say.

Others expressed themselves with the tears of disappointment.

After three days of testimony from police officers, medical personnel and friends and family of both Bunch and Gray, the jury entered deliberations around 2 p.m. on Thursday afternoon. They were asked to decide whether Bunch was guilty of the initial charge of second degree murder, guilty of the lesser charges of voluntary or involuntary manslaughter or not guilty.

An hour later, the jury returned for clarifications on the definitions of each of the guilty charges. A half hour after that, they returned with their unanimous acquittal.

Throughout the trial, defending attorney Kris Felthousen brought forth evidence to show that Bunch was the victim, not the criminal, in those early morning hours of February 10.

"This was a horrible evening, tragic for everyone," Felthousen said in his opening arguments on Tuesday. "But Lisa Bunch did not murder Stevie Gray, not because I say so but because the evidence says so. The evidence will clearly show who the aggressor was that evening. And it was not Lisa Bunch."

During her own tearful testimony, Bunch recounted stories of ongoing verbal and physical abuse by Gray.

Describing the change in Gray's behavior when he'd been drinking, Bunch said, "He'd get violent. He'd change just like that."

On one particular night in January, Bunch said Gray tied her legs and hands with duct tape and left

her on the couch in the trailer while he and a friend went out drinking. He didn't return to untie her for three hours, she said.

The evening of February 9 started off pleasantly for the couple with mixed drinks and a steak dinner cooked by Bunch. After that she said the two of them curled up on the couch.

But it wouldn't last. Within hours, the couple was embroiled in a physical argument.

"I think Steve slapped me first and I jumped up and shoved him," Bunch said. "He punched me a lot. That night he had me under the table. He beat me on my head."

And although it wasn't the first time the two had argued, this time was different, Bunch said.

"I thought I was going to die right there under the table," she said. "There was times we fought that didn't scare me, but this time I was scared."

Bunch said she sprang for the sliding glass door leading out of the trailer, but was stopped by Gray.

"I was going to get out of the slider and run as fast as I could," Bunch said.

She said she grabbed the knife off of the counter where the dishes from dinner were still sitting.

"All I was going to do was threaten him, but then he came at me. I had to do it to get out," she said.

Prosecutors argued that the situation was not as black and white.

"Both of these people were capable of violence," argued Assistant District Attorney Robert Trivette. "Nobody is standing up here saying that Stevie Gray is an angel. He had problems. He had alcohol problems. But to say that she had nothing to do with what happened that night is a travesty."

Trivette argued that if Bunch was desperate to get out of the trailer, she could have used the back door which was only a few feet away from the table.

And Bunch and Gray were not alone in the trailer that night.

"This case is interesting because unlike many cases like this, there is an eyewitness," Trivette said.

Neighbor and friend Dan Bosman had come over around midnight to visit Gray and found the couple in the middle of an argument.

"Steve said, 'It's really nice to see you, but it's a very bad time for you to be here,'" Bosman said.

Bosman said he started to leave, but Gray asked him to stay.

"They just kept continually fighting," Bosman said. "They just kept saying awful things about their families."

But that is where the similarities between the testimonies of Bunch and Bosman end.

Although Bosman said Gray had struck Bunch on the head that night, he said Bunch grabbed the knife after Gray had said something particularly hurtful to her, not right after she was hit.

"She came out of the kitchen and ran towards him with the knife," Bosman said.

And Bosman said that he tried to separate them.

"I come up to her about two feet away and said, 'We don't need none of that knife (stuff) going on around here,'" Bosman said.

But he said Bunch swung the knife at him and then "went towards (Gray) and poked him."

At first, no one in the trailer thought the wound was serious. Gray sat on the couch, drank a beer and smoked a cigarette. It was almost 45 minutes after the incident — around 2 a.m. — before Bunch and Bosman began to get concerned and Bunch called the police. From that point, Gray's condition deteriorated quickly.

Gray was airlifted to Sentara Norfolk (Va.) Hospital, where he died shortly after.

The trial ends the issue from the standpoint of the state.

"I think all of us approach it as you go in and do the best job you can and submit it to the jury and they decide based on the facts and the law. That's all we can do," said District Attorney Frank Parrish.

Parrish said the family could bring civil charges against Bunch but said he did not know whether the family had decided to pursue this option.