



CHRISTOPHER R. TUNNELL

ASHLAND COUNTY
PROSECUTING ATTORNEY

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ASHLAND COUNTY PROSECUTING ATTORNEY ANNOUNCES GUILTY PLEA AND SENTENCING IN THE MURDER OF KURTIS HARSTINE

ASHLAND, OHIO-Today, Ashland County Prosecuting Attorney Christopher R. Tunnell announced that Howard Dwayne Walters, age 60, pled guilty to multiple charges, including Aggravated Murder, Aggravated Burglary, Aggravated Robbery, and Tampering with Evidence, in connection with the murder of Kurtis Harstine. Walters was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole after 33 years.

The plea and sentencing took place in the Ashland County Court of Common Pleas before Judge Janet R. Burnside, who was appointed to preside over the case by the Ohio Supreme Court after Judge David Stimpert recused himself due to a conflict of interest.

On January 27, 2023, Kurtis Harstine was found deceased from two gunshot wounds inside a residence on Township Road 851. At the time of his death, Mr. Harstine and his wife were in the midst of a divorce, and the residence on TR 851 had been the marital home. Following a lengthy and thorough investigation, law enforcement identified and charged Howard Dwayne Walters, Mr. Harstine's father-in-law, as the perpetrator. Walters was later indicted with charges that included the possibility of the death penalty.

Under the plea agreement, Walters received the following sentence:

- **Aggravated Murder (Count One) - Life with the possibility of parole after 30 years**
- **Firearm Specification - 3 additional years**
- **Aggravated Burglary (Count Four) -10 to 15 years**
- **Aggravated Robbery (Count Six) -10 to 15 years**
- **Tampering with Evidence (Counts Seven, Eight, and Nine) - 30 months each**

Pursuant to the agreement, the sentences for Aggravated Murder and the Firearm Specification will run consecutively, while all other sentences will run concurrently. As a result, Walters will not be eligible for parole until he has served 33 years in prison.

"This case represents an unspeakable tragedy, and while no sentence can undo the pain caused by the defendant's actions, we believe this outcome ensures justice for Kurtis Harstine, his family, and our community," said Prosecuting Attorney Christopher R. Tunnell. "Through the diligent efforts of law enforcement and my office, we have secured a resolution that holds Mr. Walters accountable for his crimes. When the defendant first sees a parole board he will be over 90 years old. Today's sentence is effectively a life term for this killer and he will never breathe free again."

The prosecution consulted with the victim's family as part of the process of arriving at the plea agreement. According to Prosecutor Tunnell, the goal of today's proceedings was to ensure a life sentence and spare Mr. Harstine's loved ones from the prolonged emotional trauma of courtroom proceedings, and to avoid the inevitable appeals that come in the aftermath of a trial.

Local and state law enforcement, including the Ashland County Sheriff's Office, Ashland Police Department, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, Ohio State Highway Patrol Intelligence Unit, and Ohio Organized Crime Investigations Commission played critical roles in bringing this case to justice. Prosecutor Tunnell expressed gratitude for their tireless dedication and thorough investigative work.

"We want to thank the men and women in law enforcement who worked tirelessly to ensure this defendant was brought to justice. This is just another example of our law enforcement community cooperating together to achieve concrete results." Tunnell stated. "Our thoughts remain with Kurtis Harstine's family, and we hope this conviction provides some measure of closure as they continue to heal."

The Ashland County Prosecutor's Office remains committed to pursuing justice for victims of violent crime and ensuring that those who commit heinous acts are held fully accountable under the law.