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Beaufort doctor sentenced to 1 year for role in cocaine, prescription drug ring

By ERIN MOODY

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Dr. Vincent Rhodes, center, holding the door, leaves a Charleston courthouse Oct. 29, 2014, after his sentencing hearing. Rhodes was given 12 months and a day in a minimum security Florida prison.

BY ERIN MOODY — Staff photo

• Others charged

A separate federal indictment, which has been tied to David Vincent Rhodes, charges 31 people with conspiring to "unlawfully possess with intent to sell and distribute" oxycodone or cocaine or both.

Of those people, 22 have pleaded guilty:

- Leon Edward Hudson Jr., Aug. 13, 2013
- Jeremy Heape Harriott, Sept. 23, 2013
- Carson Reed Lewin, May 21
- Franklin Babecki, May 28
- Devan Faltus, Aug. 11
- Sam Elliott Langford, Aug. 11
- Steven Leonard Parker, Aug. 11
- Katherine Marie Swiatocha, Aug. 11
- Donta Mikel Williams, Aug. 12
- M.C. Williams, Aug. 12
- Anthony Jarvis King, Aug. 12
- Randall Smith, Sept. 9
- Kimberly Filbert, Sept. 9
- James R. Gray, Sept. 30
- Austin Mock, Sept. 30
- Ryan Hester, Oct. 1
- Gregory Shelton, Oct. 1
- Tiffany Shelton, Oct. 1
- David Heape Harriott pleaded guilty Feb. 26; sentenced to time served on Sept. 10.
- Henry Wallace pleaded guilty Aug. 13, 2013; sentenced to five years on July 30.
- John Corson pleaded guilty March 19; sentenced to time served on June 25, 2014.
- Jason Heape Harriott pleaded guilty Jan. 24, 2013; sentenced to 10 years and one month on May 27, 2014.

A well-known Beaufort doctor involved in a cocaine-for-prescription-drugs ring was sentenced Wednesday to a year and a day in a minimum-security prison in Florida.

David Vincent Rhodes, one of 32 people under indictment in the case, was sentenced by Judge Sol Blatt Jr. in federal court in Charleston.

Rhodes pleaded guilty in February 2013 to conspiracy to possess and distribute oxycodone and said he wrote painkiller prescriptions for people who did not need them in exchange for cocaine.

In testimony Wednesday, Rhodes apologized to his family, the courts and his patients.

"I apologize for all of my patients who put their trust in me for years and I became friends with, and in one fell swoop I failed them," he said. " ... That's what's most horrible to me -- I hurt my patients."

The verdict followed almost three hours of testimony from Rhodes, his mother, his wife and 16 others, ranging from patients to family friends to colleagues to medical professionals.

Blatt said he had never seen so many people at a sentencing hearing in support of a defendant.

All asked the judge for leniency. They emphasized Rhodes' completion of drug and alcohol rehabilitation, his community service, his work ethic and his cooperation with the investigation of the drug ring.

"I've seen a lot of bad people come and go, in and out of my career," said patient David Topper, a retired law enforcement officer. "And I'm here to tell you, Dr. Rhodes is not one of those bad people."

Character witnesses told Blatt how Rhodes would take money out of his own pockets and give to patients to buy medicine they couldn't afford, or make house calls to those who had difficulty making office visits. Others mentioned free high school sports physicals to students who could not afford them.

"He and his family have paid the price," said Ed Wallace, a friend. "... I just hope, deep down in my heart, you will let him do what he does best, and that's be a doctor."

Defense attorney Lionel Lofton asked that Rhodes be sentenced to extended community service with Beaufort-Jasper-Hampton Comprehensive Health Services. The agency serves 17,000 patients, of which 7,000 have no insurance, according to CEO Roland Gardner.

While noting Rhodes' medical education and addiction, Blatt asked how and why Rhodes did not realize the damage he was causing by writing prescriptions to people who did not need them. Rhodes said his addiction clouded his decision-making.

After a brief recess, Blatt announced the sentence.

"I've never seen such support as you have here, but all the support in the world can't make right the wrong that you did," he said.

He dismissed Assistant U.S. Attorney Nathan Williams' statement that Rhodes was a "high-level drug dealer" who put 18,000 pills on the Beaufort market. Blatt also called Williams' statement that Rhodes and his prescriptions were a catalyst for a growing heroin problem in Beaufort "ridiculous."

Sentencing guidelines were 87 to 108 months, with one to three years' supervised release and fines of \$15,000 to \$150,000.

"I get that he made some bad decisions, but 18,000 pills is just not something he can walk away from," Blatt said. "... I just can't let you leave knowing how many oxycodone habits you've put on the market."

Williams said he respected Blatt's decision.

Lofton said he was satisfied with the sentence, especially as there will be no probation and, with early release, Rhodes could be out in 10 months. Rhodes is to report for incarceration Feb. 1.

Rhodes has been on indefinite leave from his practice since May 2012, and his medical license is suspended.

Celeste Jones, the attorney handling Rhodes' medical license proceedings, said the S.C. Board of Medical Examiners has been waiting for the end of criminal proceedings before acting on Rhodes' suspension.

She said reinstatement is not ruled out by the verdict, but it will be months before a decision is made.

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