

**US ATTORNEY'S OFFICE**



**SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF WEST VIRGINIA**

**Charles T. Miller, US Attorney**

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# **NEWS RELEASE**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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## **MINGO COUNTY RESIDENTS SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR THEIR ROLE IN THE MURDER OF A FEDERAL CONFIDENTIAL INFORMANT**

Charleston, WV – A federal jury sitting in Charleston, WV sentenced two Mingo County residents to death for their roles in the murder of a confidential informant. **GEORGE M. LECCO, 58, of Red Jacket, WV** and **VALERIE SUZETTE FRIEND, 45, of Matewan, WV**, were found guilty of various charges, including two capital murder counts, earlier this month following approximately four weeks of trial.

The case centers around the murder of a confidential informant by Friend and Patricia Burton on Lecco's orders on April 16, 2005. The murder was to prevent the informant from providing information about Lecco's cocaine conspiracy operating out of his pizzeria, The Pizza Plus in Red Jacket.

"This case should send a clear message to violent, drug offenders in the Southern District of West Virginia. You will be brought to justice," stated United States Attorney Charles T. Miller.

Lecco and Friend were each found guilty of conspiracy to distribute 500 grams or more of cocaine; murder with a firearm during and in relation to that cocaine conspiracy; killing a person for aiding a federal investigation; and conspiracy to destroy and conceal evidence. The jury also found Lecco guilty of three counts of use of a firearm during and in relation to drug trafficking; two counts of being a felon in possession of a firearm; and four counts of distribution of cocaine.

The jury deliberated for four days on whether to impose life sentences or death for Lecco and Friend.

Patricia Burton pled guilty on December 8, 2005, for her role in the drug conspiracy and murder. Burton testified at trial that she and Friend murdered the confidential informant at Lecco's request. Burton further testified that Lecco promised Friend cocaine as payment for the murder. A sentencing hearing has not been scheduled for Burton.

Others previously pled guilty for their involvement in the cocaine conspiracy or the cover up of the murder. Charles Burton, Patricia Burton's husband, was sentenced to 70 months in prison last May. Charles Burton testified at trial to helping burn Friend's trunk liner following the murder. He also testified that he was present when Friend and Lecco moved the victim from the trailer in which she was murdered to a nearby grave. Walter Harmon, Lecco's cousin, was sentenced to 70 months in prison on February 17, 2006. Harmon admitted to digging the grave and burning the trailer where the victim was murdered, at Lecco's request. Charles T. Hatfield and James Kitchen were each sentenced for conspiracy to distribute cocaine. Hatfield received 46 months in prison and Kitchen was sentenced to 63 months in prison.

Miller: "I commend the unsung heroes – the law enforcement agents in this case, especially First Sgt. David M. Nelson, Trooper First Class Anthony S. Perdue, and retired Lt. Cliff Akers of the West Virginia State Police, for their aggressive and unrelenting investigation. I'd also like to commend my fine prosecutors, Criminal Chief Philip Wright, Assistant United States Attorney R. Gregory Mcvey, and DOJ Trial Attorney Richard Burns. This case is a fine example of collaboration among federal, state & local agencies and what we can do, working together, in the war against drugs."

Special Agent in Charge Paul J. Vido of the Louisville Field Division, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) commented that he "hoped that the victim's family in the midst of such a painful loss can take some comfort in knowing that this law enforcement team worked relentlessly to ensure that such a heinous and cowardly act did not go unpunished."

The investigation was conducted by the West Virginia State Police in conjunction with the Huntington Drug and Violent Crime Task Force, the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

United States District Judge John T. Copenhaver, Jr. presided over the trial.

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