

Why is nurse Michelle Heughins facing charges for the December 2019 prison death of John Neville?

Kevin Reed
16 May 2022

Michelle Heughins, a former county detention center nurse, is facing a charge of involuntary manslaughter in connection with the death of an inmate that occurred in December 2019 at Forsyth County Jail in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

On April 4, a secret grand jury in Winston-Salem singled out Ms. Heughins for indictment in the death of John Elliott Neville, 56, of Greensboro, even though she was attempting to save his life. Meanwhile, the grand jury brought no charges against five former detention center officers who had handcuffed Neville, kneeled on him and held him in a prone position known to cause asphyxiation just before he died.

Following the indictment, Claire Rauscher, attorney for the former nurse, said, “Michelle Heughins was the only person who tried to save Mr. Neville at the jail that day. It was the detention officers who restrained him and put him on his stomach, handcuffed, and had her leave the room.”

Rauscher told CNN that the indictment was “obviously wrong,” and that Heughins “never restrained him, never held him down,” and the only time she touched or assisted Neville “was to take his vitals and perform CPR.”

The attorney has said Heughins will plead not guilty and expressed confidence that her client will be fully vindicated when the case gets to trial. She has filed a notice with the court asking to wave the probable cause hearing and requesting a speedy trial.

A series of five bodycam videos lasting 45 minutes released on August 5, 2020, by Forsyth County Superior Court Judge R. Gregory Horne capture the events that led up to Neville’s gruesome death at the hands of a special response team. At no point in the

video is Heughins seen participating in the brutal treatment of the victim.

According to previously published news reports, John Neville was arrested on December 1, 2019, and was being held at the county jail when he suffered an “unknown” medical emergency in his cell. At 3:26 a.m. on December 2, a cellmate notified jail officers that Neville had fallen from his top bunk bed. When the officers reached him, he was shaking and sweating, with vomit on his clothes, and he was bleeding around his mouth.

It is at this point that the bodycam video picked up what happened. Initially, Heughins is seen trying to administer medical attention to Neville as he lay on the floor below his bunk. However, Neville is disoriented, starts to become restless and begins to cry out. The immediate response of the prison guards is to forcibly restrain him. As Neville continues to call out and plead for help, the five special response guards put him in handcuffs with his hands behind his back, place a “spit bag” over his head and strap him into a transport chair.

The special response team then moves Neville to another area of the jail. Along the way, the officers stop in what appears to be a stairwell, and Heughins takes his blood pressure. The prison guard group then proceeds down a hallway, moves Neville into a single cell and onto a mattress on the floor, placing him facedown with the handcuffs behind his back. The five officers hold him facedown and kneel on his back and legs. Neville remains disoriented throughout the ordeal and cries out for his mother and yells 28 times that he cannot breathe.

In a scene of indescribable cruelty, the prison guards

hog-tie Neville while they botch the removal of his handcuffs, breaking off a key and, in the end, are only able to remove the cuffs with bolt cutters. The entire process of removing the handcuffs takes more than 15 minutes. By the time the officers leave the cell, Neville is in severe distress, no longer crying out or moving at all.

At this point, Heughins is seen watching through the cell door and telling an officer that Neville is not moving or possibly that he is not breathing. When the jail cell door is reopened, Heughins leads the effort to save the inmate's life by administering CPR, at which point the video clip ends. EMS was called in and Neville was taken to nearby Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, where he died two days later.

According to a medical examiner's report, the cause of Neville's death was "complications of hypoxic ischemic brain injury due to cardiopulmonary arrest due to positional and compressional asphyxia during prone restraint." This means that he died from a brain injury due to a loss of heart function when he stopped breathing during the prison guard assault. Additional conditions listed on the report were "acute altered mental status" and "asthma."

Initially, Forsyth County District Attorney Jim O'Neill arrested and charged the five officers—Lt. Lavette Maria Williams, Cpl. Edward Joseph Roussel, Officer Sarah Elizabeth Poole, Officer Antonio Woodley Jr. and Officer Christopher Bryan Stamper—as well as Ms. Heughins with involuntary manslaughter in July 2020 for the death of Neville, more than six months after he died.

Both the county DA and the sheriff attempted to cover up the death of Neville. Due to the efforts of the family and local news media, they were forced to disclose the videos. They are now attempting to scapegoat Heughins as part of the effort to sweep the death of John Neville under the rug.

Sean Neville, the son of John Neville, called it "disheartening that the videos of our father gasping for air and begging for mercy while he was bound and suffocated do not seem to have gained any purchase with Forsyth County or Wellpath Care." Wellpath is the contractor with the county for providing medical services at the detention facility.

Sean Neville also filed a federal lawsuit in late 2021 against the defendants in the criminal case, Sheriff

Bobby Kimbrough Jr., Forsyth County and Wellpath LLC.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact