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Accused Murderer Makes a Deal

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- The Laura Kate Winterbottom Memorial Fund

Burlington, Vermont - July 16, 2007

The man charged in the kidnapping, rape and murder of a Burlington woman will not go on trial for his crimes.

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Police say Gerald Montgomery has struck a plea deal for killing Laura Winterbottom two years ago. He will be in court on Friday to formally change his plea and receive his sentence.

There is a gag order in place until then, so no one involved in the deal is talking on the record. But sources tell Channel 3 he'll serve 43 years to life for the crime. Montgomery avoids a sentence of life without parole, which he could have received had a jury found him guilty of first-degree murder. Laura Winterbottom's family avoids the trauma of a trial.

Montgomery is accused of kidnapping Laura Winterbottom in downtown Burlington on March 9, 2005, after she left a Church Street bar. Her body was found in her car in the Old

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North End. She had been raped and strangled -- a random crime that stunned the Burlington community.

Gerald Montgomery was arrested two weeks later, charged with first-degree murder and sexual assault. He was initially found incompetent to stand trial, but after months of psychiatric care doctors determined that he

was mentally fit. Trial was expected to begin this summer.

Under an apparent plea deal, he'll serve 43 years to life in prison. Sources tell Channel 3 the deal has been in the works for months. It had been on hold pending the completion of DNA testing. DNA from the crime scene and on the victim had to be matched to DNA taken from Montgomery.

Sources say Montgomery will plead guilty to first-degree murder. He is facing other charges connected to the kidnapping and rape of Laura Winterbottom, but it is not clear how those charges will be addressed.

The plea deal and sentencing will mean closure for the legal side of this story. But on the practical side, crisis counselors hope this is not the end to the dialogue.

The Women's Rape Crisis Center said this case led to more awareness about violent crime in our community, but there are still important lessons that need to take hold.

"One of the biggest lessons is these crimes can happen to anybody," said Cathleen Wilson, the center's executive director. "People who are conscious about their safety, people who make healthy choices, it can happen to anybody under any circumstances. That's important lesson number one, and number two is, if someone were to come forward and tell you this happened to them, to believe them and support them and validate their experience, and to encourage them to report so that maybe along the way the Gerald Montgomerys of the world will get stopped before they commit murder."

Laura Winterbottom's family has set up a fund in her memory. It raises money for two purposes: helping female victims of rape and violence, and supporting art and nature programs, especially for kids who wouldn't be able to afford those opportunities.

On September 8th they're raising money for the fund with a 5K walk on Burlington's bike path and Oakledge Park, two places she visited often. Check the link at the top of this story to learn more.

Kate Duffy - WCAX News



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