



I24 You Saved My Butt: A Change in Jurisdiction for a Threat Against a Judge, and Why Forensic Psychiatrists Exist

Vivian Chern Shnaidman, MD*, Princeton, NJ 08540

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the myriad of issues that occur when mentally ill plaintiffs and defendants are let loose in the civil arena as *pro se* litigants. Attendees will understand how the legal world, as well as the rest of the medical world, is sorely lacking in the understanding of the mental health field. Through the detailed analysis of one specific custody case, including the threats to one judge's life and the resulting change in jurisdiction of the trial that did not lead to new charges, attendees will begin to identify every step at which potentially dangerous individuals may be diverted toward treatment, and every juncture where a forensic psychiatrist might "first do no harm." The ethical, moral, and legal implications of our field will be discussed within the framework of one real case.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the many opportunities forensic psychiatrists and psychologists have to intervene in the trajectory toward dangerousness. This case illustrates the long-term decompensation of one individual, his multiple encounters with both the medical and the criminal justice systems, and every instance in which his mental illness was ignored. It culminated with a death threat against a judge that was handled via a change in venue, which could have resulted in the death of that judge. This case is a perfect teaching case to help the forensic mental health and legal communities understand our roles in preventing acts of violence and could theoretically result in new legislation.

The case of DS began as a routine family spat. DS claimed to be educated and appeared to be intelligent. When he could not hold a job and did not appear to behave like other young husbands, his wife asked him to please go for counseling. His refusal led to a series of unfortunate events, culminating in a divorce. As time went on, DS began to behave in more and more bizarre ways. Despite the numerous episodes of imminent danger to his children and the existence of one reliable parent, the laws surrounding the requirements of equitable distribution of parenting time led to the courts permitting DS to have ongoing access to his two very young children and to continually put them in harm's way.

This case presentation will examine the story of this case and the legal system that ignores mental illness at every turn. Attendees will also see how other medical specialties minimize and marginalize psychiatry, how psychiatric illness is misunderstood, and how, when this case culminated in a clear and convincing threat to a judge's life in open court, this judge's only recourse was to send the case to another jurisdiction. (What she said in the title was only the punch line, years later!)

Cases similar to this one enter the legal system every day and are disposed of in similar ways, often resulting in much more catastrophic outcomes. Some will be presented via their published decisions as a part of this presentation. This presentation will include discussion about how to inform both the legal community as well as the general population via the media about every opportunity to stop meaningless violence by addressing mental illness in the community. This case is a fantastic example; because of every dropped opportunity, it illustrates and offers the chance to brainstorm some ideas for the future, supporting the theme of this year's meeting, *Crossing Borders*, where we may finally cross the border between psychiatry and law and bring the two disciplines together in a way that would truly serve society as well as individuals.

Death Threat by Mentally Ill, Change in Venue, Prediction of Dangerousness