

McNeil sentenced in Flowerfield Twp. murder case

By Alek Haak-Frost
 Managing Editor

CENTREVILLE — Tyler McNeil, 21, of Dowagiac was sentenced Friday in St. Joseph County Circuit Court for his role in the death of 41-year-old Kevin Johnson, a Kentucky truck driver who was shot and killed in Flowerfield Township in the early morning hours of Nov. 15, 2018.



KEVIN JOHNSON

As part of a plea agreement with the St. Joseph County Prosecutor's Office, McNeil pled guilty to one count of armed robbery in exchange for his testimony in the trial of codefendant Theron Phone Hunt, also of Dowagiac. Hunt, who will be sentenced in February, was convicted of first-degree felony murder — which carries a mandatory life sentence — and five other charges earlier this month in St. Joseph County Circuit Court. Kayla Cheney, the other codefendant in the case, admitted to pulling the trigger of the 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun that killed Kevin Johnson, and is currently serving a 25 to 75-year sentence for second-degree murder.

Circuit Court Judge Paul Stutesman sentenced McNeil Friday to a minimum of 12 years and up to 60 years in prison with 433 days served. McNeil was also ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$7,000 as well as crime victim and state costs in the amount of \$198. According to court documents restitution is joint and several with codefendants Hunt and Cheney.

Prior to sentencing, Stutesman heard from McNeil and one of Kevin Johnson's older brothers Bradley Johnson. McNeil, the owner of the murder weapon, expressed remorse for his part in Kevin Johnson's death.

"I want you (Judge Stutesman) and the family to know that I apologize,

and I take full responsibility for my actions during this crime. I also want you to know that while paying my dues to society it won't be time wasted," McNeil said. "[I will use every day] to prepare myself to be a productive member of society for my daughter, my parents, my siblings and my family."

McNeil added that he realizes it's time for him to grow up, and is "sorry that it had to come to this to realize how precious my life is."

"I know that words can't describe how the family feels but I hope deep down inside someday they can forgive me."

Bradley Johnson lamented over the loss his family experienced and how their lives "changed forever" due to "the actions of Theron Hunt, Kayla Cheney and Tyler McNeil."

"Kevin lost his life over \$200," Bradley said. "[...] To lose someone we loved so much for such a senseless act has been difficult, and sometimes it seems likely that we may never be able to move forward. Kevin's mom lost her only son, and as a parent myself I can't imagine what she goes through every day and what she will go through for the rest of her life. Kevin left behind two sons who love him dearly. He had a great relationship with both of his boys. He was a wonderful father because Kevin was like a big kid himself.

Kevin won't be here to see his sons grow, get married, have kids or be a grandfather. It's all been taken away."

Bradley added that he and his older brother have lost their "baby brother," and while they didn't get to see one another as often as they may have liked, the thought of never seeing Kevin again — as well as what Kevin went through just moments before his death — keeps Bradley awake at night.

"There have been many nights that I've laid awake for hours just thinking about what my brother had to go through in the final moments of his life," Bradley said. "I think of what Heather (Little) and Staniela (King) were forced to go through, and the impact it's going to have on them for the rest of their lives. I get angry that these people were willing to endanger all of these lives and take my brother's (life) over \$200."

Following Bradley's statement, Stutesman, who presided over Hunt's trial, said "six lives have been ruined by methamphetamine" and all of their families received the same phone calls.

"Tyler has been arrested for murder," Theron has been arrested for murder, "Your brother has passed." And it wasn't worth anything, doesn't matter if it was \$1,000, \$10,000 or \$1,000,000, it wasn't worth (the pain it caused). Methamphetamine, I don't know about in Kentucky, but (in Michigan) methamphetamine is a terribly addictive and devastating drug. I wish I could say this was a freak occurrence but if you (sat here) for the rest of the afternoon you would hear three more cases pretty similar to this one except nobody died. I don't know what's going on or what we can do to correct it."

Alek Haak-Frost can be reached at 279-7488 ext. 22 or alek@threeriversnews.com.



COMMERCIAL-NEWS | ROBERT TOMLINSON

United States Rep. Fred Upton (left) and Michigan State Rep. Aaron Miller (right) gave a legislative update at a breakfast hosted by the Three Rivers Area Chamber of Commerce Friday at the St. Joseph County Commission on Aging's Rivers Enrichment Center in Three Rivers.

Reps. Miller, Upton give updates on local, federal legislatures

By Robert Tomlinson
 Staff Writer

THREE RIVERS — In front of a group of local business owners, city and township officials, and other area residents Friday, two local legislators gave an update on what has been occurring in the past year in the Michigan House of Representatives and the United States House of Representatives.

Michigan State Rep. Aaron Miller and United States Rep. Fred Upton gave an update on both the state House and U.S. House during a legislative update breakfast hosted by the Three Rivers Area Chamber of Commerce at the St. Joseph County Commission on Aging's Rivers Enrichment Center in Three Rivers. Michigan State Sen. Kim LaSata was originally scheduled to attend, but pulled out last week due to scheduling conflicts.

Miller said the last year was an "interesting" year for the state House, particularly because of a return to a split government in Michigan, with Republicans controlling both the state House and state Senate, while Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, controls the governor's mansion. He said that situation presents many advantages and challenges, especially with the state's budget battle over the last year.

Miller said because incumbent governors would have already been working on the next year's budget for a couple of months—new governors have more time under the State Constitution to put out their first budget—the budget process got off to a late start due to the election of a new Governor. That late start was further exacerbated by the road funding debate, which Miller said affects everything else in the budget.

"Money coming from one area in the budget affects somewhere else where it could have gone," Miller said. "Really, general fund affects the school aid fund and vice versa. Every other fund that Michigan puts its hand on, you might say that tobacco tax revenue has nothing to do with schools or roads, well it has everything to do with it because of budget pressures and because where money is taken for one thing over here, that's money that can't go over here to refill the general fund and road funding."

See LEGISLATURES, page 3

Girls on the Run program helping shape tomorrow's Women on the Go

By William A. Baltz
 Special to the Commercial-News

Words matter. That was the theme of one of many lessons Emma Schnepf and her best friend, Kelsey Mack, both 11 years old, learned as part of their local Girls on the Run after-school program, which went 10-weeks last spring.

"Every time we ran past a coach, she would put a letter on us until it spelled words matter," Emma says. "It was really fun."

"Emma's mom showed us how when you squeeze a tube of toothpaste and the toothpaste comes out but you can't put it back in," Kelsey adds. "It's the same with words. Once you say them they

matter—and are tough to take back."

Emma's mother, Casey, and others featured in the Women on the Go series volunteer as coaches and role models for the Constantine council of Girls on the Run International, an organization that began in 1996 with one school in North Carolina and has since grown with councils across the nation and many parts of the world. According to its website, the mission of Girls on the Run is to help girls "define their lives on their own terms...and celebrate all that makes them unique."

"I've seen Emma's running improve as well as her attitude—it's overall more positive," Casey says.

"Kelsey is my niece, and I really enjoy being a coach for her and the other girls," says Jodie Walker, who owns Jaywalker restaurant in Mottville and is an accomplished triathlete featured in this series. "I hope today's girls on the run will be tomorrow's women on the go," she adds with a smile. "It's a program that promotes progress in movement and encouragement for self improvement. It's great to see how proud these girls are of themselves after putting in the time and effort."

In addition to lessons in running and building character, the

Constantine Girls on the Run council also teaches supporting the community. Coaches and girls conducted a bake sale this year and clothing drive last year raising much-needed funds for a local animal shelter.

Girls on the Run International, headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, reports that 1.8 million girls have been transformed. According to a recently conducted survey by the organization, 97 percent of the girls said they learned critical life skills, 96 percent of participating schools would offer the program again, and 94 percent of parents reported it was a valuable experience for their girl.

Kristina Gousetis is Girls on the Run program manager of Southwest Michigan, which encompasses the counties of Berrien, Cass, Van Buren and St. Joseph. A coach for five years, she recently discussed the positive impact the program has in her community.

William Allen Baltz: Approximately how many girls and coaches are in your program in Southwest Michigan?

Kristina Gousetis: There were 759 girls in our program between all four counties this year. The age range is



PHOTO PROVIDED

Future Women on the Go: Best friends Kelsey Mack (left) and Emma Schnepf enjoy participating in the Girls on the Run after-school program.

third through fifth graders. Included in that number are girls in our Heart and Sole program, which is sixth through eighth grade. For the 2019 program we had 212 coaches.

WAB: What are the goals and objectives of Girls on the Run? What skills does the organization teach? What values does it impart?

KG: The goal and objective is to have every girl that participates in our program to realize her limitless

potential. Each girl is encouraged to boldly pursue her dreams. Empowerment, responsibility, diversity, connectedness, healthy habits and compassion are a few of the key skills, concepts and values we impart. We teach girls how to lead with an open heart, stand up for themselves and others, and recognize their power and responsibility to be intentional in decision making.

See GIRLS ON THE RUN, page 3

Are you invested properly? Get a second opinion.
 Brigitte Romanelli
 Financial Advisor
 186 South Grand St
 Schoolcraft, MI 49087
 Member SIPC
Edward Jones
 MAKING SENSE OF INVESTING
 brigitte.romanelli@edwardjones.com
 269-718-5394



THREE RIVERS MEDIA
 Commercial News • threeriversnews.com • Penny Server
 To subscribe, place an ad or submit a news tip call: 269.279.7488

HAVE A GREAT DAY, EVERYONE!



TODAY'S WEATHER
 HIGH: 41° LOW: 31°