

CRIME

She helped others fight addiction before fentanyl killed her. Her dealer is sent to prison

Fairview's Taylor Miller started Facebook group to help fellow addicts years before she died at 27 in 2021. Fentanyl dealer is sentenced in her fatal overdose after reaching agreement with DA.



Ed Palattella

Erie Times-News

Published 1:54 p.m. ET July 16, 2024 | Updated 1:54 p.m. ET July 16, 2024

Key Points

In 2014, as opioid epidemic was taking hold in Erie County, Taylor Miller, then 20, went public with her heroin addiction and set up online support group

Miller continued to struggle with addiction until she died of a fentanyl overdose at her Fairview Township residence in 2021

Police charged the fellow addict who supplied the fatal dose of fentanyl, and his sentencing focused on the tragedies of the opioid scourge as Miller's father spoke of 'eternal heartbreak'

The 2021 overdose death of 27-year-old Fairview Township resident Taylor Miller shook her family and the community.

Among those hit was the community of fellow addicts whom Miller helped push toward recovery through the advocacy efforts she launched on Facebook seven years before she died.

Jeffrey L. Thomas was a member of the community of fellow addicts.

He was also a drug dealer who supplied the fentanyl that fueled Miller's overdose, bringing an end to "a beautiful life that was taken too soon," as a prosecutor said in Erie County Common Pleas Court on Tuesday.

The prosecutor spoke as he asked a judge to follow a plea deal and sentence Thomas, 43, to four to eight years in state prison for his guilty plea to the first-degree felony of a drug delivery resulting in a death.

Thomas, who pleaded guilty in May, faced a maximum sentence of 20 years. The recommended sentence of four to eight years was in the mitigated range of the state sentencing guidelines.

The District Attorney's Office and the defense agreed to the lesser sentence mainly because Thomas aided police in probing Miller's death and in other investigations. The "substantial cooperation" helped police make arrests in more than 10 felony cases, the prosecutor, Assistant District Attorney Charles Cantrell, said in court.

Judge Daniel Brabender accepted the sentencing recommendation and ordered Thomas to state prison for four to eight years, which Brabender said "is not a slap on the wrist."

"That is a good chunk of your young life," he told Thomas, who had been free on bond.

Before he issued the sentence, Brabender asked Miller's father, Keith Miller, what he thought of the recommendation of four to eight years.

"I'm good with it. I'm not good with it," Keith Miller said. "Nothing is going to replace Taylor."

Overdose victim was 'vital part of the recovery community'

As Keith Miller and others said in court, no matter what the sentence, Taylor Miller was still gone, a victim of the opioid epidemic that has done nothing to spare Erie County as it has ravaged the nation.

"Taylor Miller was a vital part of the recovery community," said Keith Miller, who attended the hearing with 15 relatives and friends.

Taylor Miller created a Facebook page in 2014 to offer aid to others battling addiction, and she went public with her own fight with heroin. Her family has expanded that resource, called Taylor's HOPE, through a website, social media and community events.

Despite all of his daughter's work on behalf of so many people, "it only took one to provide the drugs that would kill her," Keith Miller said.

He said he is glad the drug-delivery law can help hold "at least one person accountable" even as his family struggles to cope with the "eternal heartbreak" of his daughter's death.

"Nothing can be done to fill the abyss in our lives," Keith Miller said.

Defendant's family shares own overdose tragedy

A similar sentiment came from the other side of the courtroom, where five people sat in support of Thomas. They included his father-in-law, Jeff Pinski.

Pinski addressed Brabender and offered his condolences to Millers' family as he spoke of his family's own drug-related tragedy: the 2022 fatal fentanyl overdose of his daughter, Amanda Pinski Thomas, 42, Thomas' wife.

"We know what your family has lost and what you have been going through," Pinski said to the Miller family.

Pinski, a retired reporter and editor at the Erie Times-News, said he realized that Thomas "must answer for the death he caused," but he said Thomas, who has college degrees in mathematics and computer science, is now sober and still has potential.

His daughter and Thomas were also "trapped in the horrific throes of an addiction that would not let them go," Pinski said. He called fentanyl an "insidious drug" and said his son-in-law "was never a bad person, but someone who made a major lapse in judgment."

A offer of remorse, and a pledge about a legacy

Thomas acknowledged the ramifications of providing the fentanyl to Taylor Miller, whom he told state police he met at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting in Fairview in 2014. In 2019, Thomas said, Miller asked him to get her "dope," and he did so

up until her death, on April 11, 2021, at her residence in Fairview.

State police reviewed financial records and other evidence in a lengthy investigation that led them in April 2023 to charge Thomas in Miller's death.

"I deeply regret the role I played in her passing," Thomas told Brabender.

He said he provided the drugs at a time when he was "again caught in the grips of addiction."

"My motivations were not malicious," Thomas said.

His lawyer, Gene Placidi, told the judge: "I can attest to the remorse Jeff feels every day."

No one questioned the remorse in court.

And no one questioned the impact Taylor Miller made during her life.

"Taylor's legacy of hope survives," Keith Miller told the judge.

Staff writer Tim Hahn contributed to this report.

Contact Ed Palattella at epalattella@timesnews.com or 814-870-1813. Follow him on X @ETNpalattella.

