

**THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In the Supreme Court**

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S.C. SUPREME COURT

**Certiorari to the Court of Appeals
APPEAL FROM BERKELEY COUNTY
Court of General Sessions**

**Maite Murphy
Circuit Court Judge**

**Court of Appeals Opinion No. 5908
Court of Appeals Case No. 2019-000687**

The State of South Carolina.....Respondent,

v.

Gabrielle Oliva Lashane Davis-KocsisPetitioner.

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

**Susan Barber Hackett
shackett@sccid.sc.gov
Office of Appellate Defense
1330 Lady Street, Suite 401
Columbia, S.C. 29201
803.734.1330**

**Jason Scott Luck
P.O. Box 47
Bennettsville, SC 29512
843.479.6863
jason@luck.law**

Attorneys for Petitioner

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CERTIFICATION OF COUNSEL

Counsel for the Petitioner certifies that he timely made a petition for rehearing in this matter, which was ruled upon by the Court of Appeals on May 25, 2022.

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

- I. Whether the Court of Appeals' opinion, which relied on *State v. Vazquez*, 364 S.C. 293, 613 S.E.2d 359 (2005) to affirm the Kocsis's sentences for kidnapping in spite of a sentence for murder, conflicts with S.C. Code § 16-3-910 and the Court's holdings in *State v. Livingston*, 282 S.C. 1, 317 S.E.2d 129 (1984) and *State v. Stroman*, 281 S.C. 508, 316 S.E.2d 395 (1984), all of which prohibit a defendant from being sentenced for both murder and kidnapping.
- II. Whether the Court of Appeals erred in affirming the trial court's admission into evidence of an unfairly prejudicial 911 call recording "for corroborative purposes and establishing the elements of the offense" when the record contains no support for this position and the trial court never listened to the recording before ruling.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Petitioner Gabrielle Oliva Lashane Davis-Kocsis (“Kocsis”) was arrested for murder, burglary, two counts of kidnapping, and criminal conspiracy. (R 503-512). These charges arose out of Kocsis’ alleged effort on September 27, 2015, to recover approximately \$1,700.00 and a motorcycle stolen by Mark Connor, who was hiding out in a well-known “trap house” located at 512 McCrystal Circle, Moncks Corner, SC 29461 (“McCrystal Circle”). During this alleged recovery effort an armed man in the party fell through the rotten floor of the house, causing his handgun to discharge and resulting in the death of Connor. (R 341-343).

Kocsis was tried on April 8-10, 2019 before Circuit Court Judge Maite Murphy in Moncks Corner, South Carolina. (R 1). The State was represented by Bart Stegall and Jordan Smith of the Ninth Circuit Solicitor’s Office, and Kocsis was represented by Grant Smaldone and Jason Luck. (R 2). The jury found Kocsis guilty of all charges, and Judge Murphy sentenced Kocsis to fifty years’ imprisonment for murder, fifty years for burglary, thirty years for each count of kidnapping, and five years for conspiracy. (R 488-489). Judge Murphy ordered these terms to be served concurrently. (R 488-489). Kocsis timely served her notice of appeal on April 18, 2019.

The Court of Appeals entertained oral arguments on February 16, 2022. The panel of Acting Judge Lockemy, Judge Geathers, and Judge Hill affirmed the Circuit Court by published opinion dated May 4, 2022 (“Opinion”). Kocsis timely filed a petition for rehearing in this matter, which the Court of Appeals denied on May 25, 2022.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Sentencing

“A sentence will not be overturned absent an abuse of discretion when the ruling is based on an error of law or a factual conclusion without evidentiary support.” *In re M.B.H.*, 387 S.C. 323, 326, 692 S.E.2d 541, 542 (2010). Errors of law are reviewed by this Court *de novo*. *E.g.*, *State v. Adams*, 409 S.C. 641, 763 S.E.2d 341 (2014); *State v. Bash*, 412 S.C. 420, 772 S.E.2d 537 (Ct. App. 2015). The interpretation of a statute is also reviewed *de novo*. *Catawba Indian Tribe of S.C. v. State*, 372 S.C. 519, 642 S.E.2d 751 (2007).

Admission of Evidence

The admission of evidence is within the discretion of the trial court and will not be reversed absent an abuse of discretion. An abuse of discretion occurs when the conclusions of the trial court either lack evidentiary support or are controlled by an error of law. The admission or exclusion of testimonial evidence falls within the sound discretion of the trial court, whose decision will not be disturbed on appeal absent abuse resulting in prejudice.

State v. Bratschi, 413 S.C. 97, 114, 775 S.E.2d 39, 48 (Ct. App. 2015) (citations and quotations omitted).

ARGUMENT

I. The Court of Appeals’ opinion conflicts with a South Carolina statute and 38-year-old precedent of this Court.

Kocsis was convicted of the kidnapping of Alexis Murray and Whitney Chance, and the murder of Mark Connor during the events of September 27, 2015. (R 484-485). She was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment for each kidnapping, and 50 years for murder. (R 488-489). It is the position of Kocsis, which is supported by the plain language of South Carolina’s kidnapping statute and precedent of this Court, that a defendant may not be sentenced for both kidnapping and murder. The Court of Appeals, however, held this prohibition is limited to situations where the kidnapping victim and the murder victim are the same. (Opinion p. 15). The Court of Appeals recognized its holding conflicted with two previous decisions of this Court:

We acknowledge Kocsis cites two opinions from our supreme court from 1984 to support her position.

(Opinion p. 15). This conflict is sufficient to grant this petition. *See* Rule 242(b)(3), SCACR (“Where the decision of the Court of Appeals is in conflict with a prior decision of the Supreme Court.”).

The South Carolina Code states a defendant convicted of kidnapping “...must be imprisoned for a period not to exceed thirty years unless sentenced for murder as provided in Section 16-3-20.” S.C. Code § 16-3-910. The plain language of this statute does not require the kidnapping victim and murder victim be the same person. This Court, citing this statute, came to the same conclusion in two opinions, neither of which have been restricted, vacated, or overruled. *See State v. Livingston*, 282 S.C. 1,

8, 317 S.E.2d 129, 133 (1984); *State v. Stroman*, 281 S.C. 508, 514, 316 S.E.2d 395, 400 (1984).

In *Livingston*, this Court vacated five kidnapping sentences (where only four murders occurred), directly holding: “We agree with *Livingston* that § 16-3-910 of the Code prevents the imposition of a life sentence for kidnapping where an accused is sentenced for murder pursuant to § 16-3-20 of the Code.” *Livingston*, 282 S.C. at 8, 317 S.E.2d at 133. *Stroman* similarly held, in a case where this Court vacated five sentences for kidnapping (where only four murders occurred): “...S.C. Code Ann. § 16-3-910...prevents the imposition of a life imprisonment sentence for kidnapping if the defendant has also been sentenced for murder pursuant to S.C. Code Ann. § 16-3-20...” *Stroman*, 281 S.C. at 514, 316 S.E.2d at 400.

In the face of *Livingston*, *Stroman*, and the clear and unambiguous language of § 16-3-910, the Court of Appeals held the prohibition of sentences for both kidnapping and murder in § 16-3-910 only applied if the victim of the murder and kidnapping were the same person. (Opinion p. 15). The Court of Appeals’ limitation of § 16-3-910 has no basis in the language of the statute; it was instead based on dictum from *State v. Vazquez*, 364 S.C. 293, 302, 613 S.E.2d 359, 363 (2005). The issue before the *Vazquez* court was whether “the trial judge erred in sentencing [the defendant] for the kidnapping of the murder victims.” *Id.* (emphasis added). What was not before the *Vazquez* court was whether a defendant may be sentenced for the kidnapping of persons other than the murder victim(s). The Court of Appeals erred

in affirming the trial court's sentence, and Kocsis is entitled to, at a minimum, vacatur of her kidnapping sentences.

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Even if § 16-3-910 was ambiguous, there exists substantial evidence of the legislature's intent to prohibit sentences for both kidnapping and murder. "The cardinal rule of statutory construction is to ascertain and effectuate the intent of the legislature." *Hodges v. Rainey*, 341 S.C. 79, 85, 533 S.E.2d 578, 581 (2000). The reviewing court must "seek a construction that gives effect to every word of a statute rather than adopting an interpretation that renders a portion meaningless." *Hinton v. South Carolina Dept. of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services*, 357 S.C. 327, 342, 592 S.E.2d 335, 343 (Ct. App. 2004). The court "must read the statute so that no word, clause, sentence, provision or part shall be rendered surplusage, or superfluous." *CFRE, LLC v. Greenville County Assessor*, 395 S.C. 67, 74, 716 S.E.2d 877, 881 (2011) (internal quotations omitted). Importantly, a penal statute is "construed strictly against the State and in favor of the defendant." *Rainey v. State*, 307 S.C. 150, 151-52, 414 S.E.2d 131, 132 (1992). Where there is "any doubt" about a statute's scope, the interpreting court is "required" to resolve it in the defendant's favor. *State v. Miles*, 421 S.C. 154, 164, 805 S.E.2d 204, 210 (Ct. App. 2017).

Pursuant to S.C. Code § 16-3-910: "[w]however shall unlawfully seize, confine, inveigle, decoy, kidnap, abduct or carry away any other person by any means whatsoever without authority of law, except when a minor is seized or taken by a parent, is guilty of a felony and, upon conviction, must be imprisoned for a period not to exceed thirty years **unless sentenced for murder as provided in Section 16-**

3-20.” (emphasis added). The plain reading of the statute requires vacation of Kocsis’s sentences for kidnapping, as she was also sentenced for murder as provided in Section 16-3-20. Had the Legislature intended for the “unless” portion of the statute to apply only when the victim of the kidnapping is also the victim of the murder, the Legislature could have said so easily; yet, the Legislature did not. Thus, interpreting the statute exactly as it is written, which this Court is obligated to do, requires vacation of Kocsis’s sentences for kidnapping.

Furthermore, the Legislature amended § 16-3-910 in 1991. *See* 1991 Act No. 117, § 1. This amendment decreased the penalty for kidnapping from a maximum sentence of life imprisonment to thirty years. *Id.* This Court decided *Livingston* roughly seven years before this amendment. *State v. Livingston*, 282 S.C. 1, 317 S.E.2d 129 (1984). In *Livingston*, the defendant was convicted of four counts of murder and five counts of kidnapping, among other offenses. *Id.* at 4, 317 S.E.2d at 130. He was sentenced to four life sentences for murder and five life sentences for kidnapping. *Id.* at 4, 317 S.E.2d at 131. Based upon § 16-3-910, this Court vacated “[t]he sentences for kidnapping.” *Id.* at 8, 317 S.E.2d at 133. This Court made no distinction between the sentences for kidnapping that concerned murder victims and the sentence for kidnapping that did not. *Id.* At the time of *Livingston*’s trial and appeal, the statute provided “[w]however shall unlawfully seize, confine, inveigle, decoy, kidnap, abduct or carry away any other person by any means whatsoever without authority of law, except when a minor is seized by a parent thereof, shall be guilty of a felony and, upon conviction, shall suffer the punishment of life

imprisonment unless sentenced for murder as provided in § 16-3-20.” S.C. Code § 16-3-910 (1985).

“The Legislature is presumed to be aware of [the appellate courts] interpretation of its statutes.” *Wigfall v. Tideland Utilities, Inc.*, 354 S.C. 100, 111, 580 S.E.2d 100, 105 (2003). “There is a presumption that the legislature has knowledge of previous legislation as well as of judicial decisions construing that legislation when later statutes are enacted concerning related subjects.” *State v. McKnight*, 352 S.C. 635, 648, 576 S.E.2d 168, 175 (2003). Where the Legislature fails to alter a statute over a long period of time, “its inaction is evidence the Legislature agrees with th[e] Court’s interpretation.” *Wigfall*, 354 S.C. at 111, 580 S.E.2d at 105.

Therefore, in 1991, when the Legislature amended the statute to decrease the maximum penalty for kidnapping, the Legislature was well aware of this Court’s interpretation of the clause excluding punishment for kidnapping when the person was also sentenced for murder – regardless of whether the murder victim and kidnapping victim were one in the same. Aware of this interpretation, the Legislature took no action to change the statutory provision. Thus, the rules of statutory construction require this Court interpret the Legislature’s decision to leave that particular clause of the statute alone, while altering the words immediately preceding that clause, to mean that the Legislature intended the statute to have the force and effect given by this Court in *Livingston*. The Court of Appeals erred in affirming the trial court’s sentence, and Kocsis is entitled to, at a minimum, vacatur of her kidnapping sentences.

II. Admission of the 911 call recording conflicts with Rule 403, SCRE and this Court’s precedent interpreting it.

The State’s first witness at trial was Peggy Brown, records custodian for Berkeley County 911. (R 37-38). The sole purpose of this witness was to introduce into evidence a September 27, 2015, recording of a 911 call made by witnesses Alexis Murray and Whitney Chance. (R 39). This recording, which is part of the Court of Appeals’ record, was raw and emotional, and it poisoned the jury, leaving such an impression that they asked to hear it again during deliberations. (R 483).

Kocsis sought to exclude this recording first in a pretrial motion in limine. (R 12-14). Despite having not listened to the recording in question (R 12; Opinion p. 4 n. 1), the trial court denied Kocsis’s motion to exclude the recording under Rule 403, SCRE, on the basis “[the 911 recording is] intended for corroborative purposes and establishing the elements of the offense.” (R 14). The trial court issued the same ruling when Kocsis contemporaneously objected to the introduction of the recording at trial. (R 39).

The Court of Appeals found the trial court did not abuse its discretion in refusing to exclude the 911 recording it never listened to. (Opinion p. 17). The trial record does not contain even a scintilla of evidence to support the trial court’s denial of Kocsis’ motion to exclude the 911 recording, and a decision without any evidentiary support is an abuse of discretion. *See Bratschi*, 413 S.C. at 114, 775 S.E.2d at 49. Peggy Brown was the first witness of trial; by the time the State introduced the 911

recording, no party had presented any evidence to the jury.¹ In order to present corroboration evidence, one must first present evidence to corroborate:

Corroborative testimony is testimony which tends to strengthen, conform, or make more certain the testimony of **another witness**. Evidence is admissible to corroborate the testimony of a **previous witness**, and whether it in fact corroborates the witness' testimony is a question for the jury.

Stroman, 281 S.C. at 510, 316 S.E.2d at 397 (quotations and citations removed) (emphasis added). With no evidence in the record to corroborate, admission of evidence on the basis it was corroborative is both an error of law and without any evidentiary support. It is also prejudicial. *See State v. Barrett*, 299 S.C. 485, 487, 386 S.E.2d 242, 243 (1989) (Improper corroboration evidence has a “cumulative effect” which has a “devastating impact”).

The trial court also found (affirmed by the Court of Appeals) the 911 recording was admissible for “establishing the elements of the offense” (R 14), *i.e.*, it was relevant. *See* Rule 401, SCRE (definition of relevant evidence). However, even relevant evidence may be excluded when its probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice. *See* Rule 403, SCRE. “Evidence is unfairly prejudicial if it has an undue tendency to suggest a decision on an improper basis, such as an emotional one.” *State v. Cheeseboro*, 346 S.C. 526, 547, 552 S.E.2d 300, 311 (2001). The 911 recording was raw and emotional, and it made such an

¹ The parties had presented opening statements, but the arguments of counsel are not evidence. *See, e.g., State v. Hughes*, 328 S.C. 146, 493 S.E.2d 821 (1997). “What the attorneys tell you during their opening statements is not evidence in this case.” (R 24).

impression on the jury that they requested to hear it again during their deliberations. (R 483). The 911 recording, which speaks for itself, does much to inflame the passions of listeners, and it offers no evidence the State could prove using less unfairly prejudicial means. Alexis Murray and Whitney Chance were available to testify at trial, and did testify at trial as to all of the information communicated in the 911 recording. The trial court abused its discretion in admitting the 911 recording, and Kocsis is therefore entitled to a new trial.

CONCLUSION

The petition should be granted.

Dated: 06/20/2022

/s/ Jason Scott Luck

Susan Barber Hackett
shackett@sccid.sc.gov
Office of Appellate Defense
1330 Lady Street, Suite 401
Columbia, S.C. 29201
803.734.1330

Jason Scott Luck
P.O. Box 47
Bennettsville, SC 29512
843.479.6863
jason@luck.law

Attorneys for Petitioner