STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA COUNTY OF LAURENS	)	IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS EIGHTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
Benjamin Ray Nabors, #233844,	)	2011-CP-30-0308
Applicant,	)	**ORDER OF DISMISSAL**
v.	)	
State of South Carolina,	)	
Respondent.	)	

This matter comes before the Court by way of an Application for Post-Conviction Relief filed March 30, 2011. Respondent made its Return on August 25, 2011. An evidentiary hearing into the matter was convened on March 13, 2013, at the Greenwood County Courthouse. The Applicant proceeded *pro se* after having Rodney Richey, Esquire relieved as counsel. J. Rutledge Johnson, Esquire, of the South Carolina Attorney General's Office, represented the Respondent.

At the hearing, Applicant testified on his own behalf. Alex Stalvey, Esquire, also testified. This Court also had before it a copy of the records of the Laurens County Clerk of Court, records from the South Carolina Department of Corrections, the guilty plea transcript, a report from the Department of Mental Health and numerous articles on the subject of methamphetamines and addiction, which were introduced by the Applicant.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Applicant is presently confined in the South Carolina Department of Corrections pursuant to orders of commitment of the Clerk of Court for Laurens County. The Applicant was indicted at the October 2009 term of the Laurens County Grand Jury for Carjacking (2009-GS-30-

1276), and Armed Robbery (2009-GS-30-1387). He was represented by Alex Stalvey, Esquire. On October 18, 2010, the Applicant pled guilty as indicted to both charges. The Honorable J. Derham Cole sentenced the Applicant to incarceration for a period of twenty-five (25) years for armed robbery, and twenty (20) years suspended with five (5) years' probation to run consecutively. He did not appeal his convictions or sentences.

In his current application, Applicant alleges that he is being held in custody unlawfully for the following reasons:

1. "I have a long history of mental illness and was not allowed to plea guilty but mentally ill, was abused by guards"

   a) "Long history of illness, earlier incident on day in question was evidence of mental illness at that time"

In his amended application filed by Rodney Richey, Esquire on January 15, 2013, the Applicant alleged numerous issues including ineffective assistance of counsel.

At the hearing, Applicant proceeded on the ineffective assistance of counsel and involuntary guilty plea claims.

FINDINGS OF FACT AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

This Court has had the opportunity to review the record in its entirety and has heard the testimony at the post conviction relief hearing. This Court has further had the opportunity to observe the witnesses presented at the hearing, closely pass upon their credibility and weigh their testimony accordingly. Set forth below are the relevant findings of facts and conclusions of law as required pursuant to S.C. Code Ann. §17-27-80 (2003).

Ineffective Assistance of Counsel

Applicant alleges he received ineffective assistance of counsel. In a PCR action, "[t]he

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burden of proof is on the applicant to prove his allegations by a preponderance of the evidence." Frasier v. State, 351 S.C. 385, 389, 570 S.E.2d 172, 174 (2002) (citing Rule 71.1(e), SCRCP). Where ineffective assistance of counsel is alleged as a ground for relief, the Applicant must prove that "counsel's conduct so undermined the proper functioning of the adversarial process that the trial cannot be relied upon as having produced a just result." Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668, 104 S.Ct. 2052, 2064, 80 L.Ed.2d 674, 692 (1984); Butler v. State, 286 S.C. 441, 334 S.E.2d 813 (1985).

The proper measure of performance is whether the attorney provided representation within the range of competence required in criminal cases. Courts presume that counsel rendered adequate assistance and made all significant decisions in the exercise of reasonable professional judgment. Butler, Id. The Applicant must overcome this presumption to receive relief. Cherry v. State, 300 S.C. 115, 386 S.E.2d 624 (1989).

First, the Applicant must prove that counsel's performance was deficient. Under this prong, attorney performance is measured by its "reasonableness under professional norms." Cherry, 300 S.C. at 117, 385 S.E.2d at 625, *citing* Strickland. Second, counsel's deficient performance must have prejudiced the Applicant such that "there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different." Cherry, 300 S.C. at 117-18, 386 S.E.2d at 625. With respect to guilty plea counsel, the Applicant must show that there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's alleged errors, he would not have pled guilty and would have insisted on going to trial. Hill v. Lockhart, 474 U.S. 52, 106 S.Ct. 366, 88 L.Ed. 2d 203 (1985).

Failure to Investigate

Applicant claims Counsel was ineffective because Counsel failed to properly investigate his case prior to his guilty plea.

"Failure to conduct an independent investigation does not constitute ineffective assistance of counsel when the allegation is supported only by mere speculation as to the result." Moorehead v. State, 329 S.C. 329, 496 S.E.2d 415 (1998). To establish counsel was inadequately prepared, an Applicant must present evidence of what counsel could have discovered or what other defenses could have been pursued had counsel been more fully prepared. Jackson v. State, 329 S.C. 345, 495 S.E.2d 768 (1998); Skeen v. State, 325 S.C. 210, 481 S.E.2d 129 (1997) (applicant not entitled to relief where no evidence presented at PCR hearing to show how additional preparation would have had any possible effect on the result at trial).

The Applicant alleged Counsel conducted no pre-trial investigation, and the Applicant had witnesses that would have confirmed this allegation. Additionally, the Applicant stated he wanted an independent mental evaluation, separate from the one conducted by the Department of Mental Health. The Applicant further made allegations that he wanted a copy of his discovery, a copy of the guilty plea transcript, a Blair[1] hearing, and an independent psychiatrist's evaluation. He also claims he was insane at the time of the crime, and Counsel did not investigate any of these issues.

Counsel testified he was appointed by Judge Hill, as the Applicant had several prior attorneys on this case. Counsel stated he met with the Applicant on numerous occasions and even had the Applicant transferred from the Laurens County Detention Center to the Greenville County Detention Center so that he could meet with the Applicant more often. Counsel testified he prepared this case for a jury trial. Counsel stated he has been practicing criminal law for eight years, including five years as an assistant solicitor.

Counsel also testified he received discovery from the State in this case and extensively discussed it with the Applicant. The discovery included, but was not limited to, the incident reports, the Applicant's statement to law enforcement, the victim's statement, the transcript from the Applicant's wife's (also a co-defendant) guilty plea transcript, the evaluation from the Department of Mental Health, which deemed the Applicant competent, the Applicant's medical records, and the Applicant's prior record. Counsel also stated he prepared a defense to the armed robbery charge and was prepared to challenge the State's theory that the Applicant was armed with a knife. Counsel would have attempted to persuade the trial judge to instruct the jury on common law robbery.

Counsel also testified he researched a possible insanity defense. Counsel would have challenged the report from the Department of Mental Health as to its finding of criminal responsibility and the Applicant's mental health status. Counsel testified he researched the medications the Applicant was taking and even had a mental health expert subpoenaed and ready to testify at the trial. However, Counsel admitted the Applicant was criminally responsible as he knew right from wrong.

Further, Counsel testified he prepared for trial and even started the trial. Counsel challenged the Applicant's statement to law enforcement in a Jackson v. Denno[2] hearing. However, the trial judge ruled the statement was admissible. Additionally, both Counsel and the State gave opening statements, and the State even called one witness before the case broke for the day. Counsel testified he spoke with the Applicant the next morning, and the Applicant told Counsel he wanted to plead guilty. Counsel then stated he advised the Applicant that, in his opinion, the Applicant would have been convicted, and the best possible sentence would result from a guilty plea. The Applicant did

1 State v. Blair, 275 S.C. 529, 273 S.E.2d 536 (1981) (competency to stand trial).
2 378 U.S. 368 (1964).

not tell Counsel he did not understand or that he was against this idea. Counsel lastly testified he felt fully prepared, and based his advice to the Applicant on his experience and the facts of the case.

This Court finds the Applicant's testimony regarding Counsel's ineffectiveness is not credible while also finding Counsel's testimony is credible. Counsel, based on his experience as a former assistant solicitor and now defense attorney, sufficiently prepared this case for trial. Counsel thoroughly discussed with the Applicant all of the discovery documents on numerous occasions. He researched the Applicant's mental health, even retaining a mental health expert to assist in case preparation and understanding the various medications the Applicant was taking. Counsel also was prepared to challenge the evaluation completed by the Department of Mental Health. The Applicant alleged an independent mental evaluation would have proven Counsel was ineffective for not having him separately evaluated. However, the Applicant failed to provide any evidence that a separate evaluation would have shown any different results than Department of Mental Health's report as to his competency to stand trial.

The Applicant also alleged he had witnesses that would have proven Counsel was ineffective. However, no witnesses testified on the Applicant's behalf at the evidentiary hearing. Prejudice from trial counsel's failure to interview or call witnesses cannot be shown where the witnesses do not testify at post-conviction relief. Underwood v. State, 309 S.C. 560, 425 S.E.2d 20 (1992).

This Court finds the Applicant has failed to meet his burden of proving counsel's performance was deficient or that he was prejudiced thereby. Accordingly, this allegation is denied.

Involuntary Guilty Plea

The Applicant alleges Counsel coerced him into pleading guilty. The Applicant also testified he pled because he was under the impression that Judge Cole would give him a life sentence and because he was on various medications at the time of his guilty plea.

To be knowing and voluntary, a plea must be entered with a full understanding of the charges and the consequences of the plea. Boykin v. Alabama, 395 U.S. 238, 89 S.Ct. 1709, 23 L.Ed.2d 274 (1969); Dover v. State, 304 S.C. 433, 405 S.E.2d 391 (1991). In determining guilty plea issues, it is proper to consider the guilty plea transcript as well as evidence at the PCR hearing. Harris v. Leeke, 282 S.C. 131, 318 S.E.2d 360 (1984).

Because a guilty plea is a solemn, judicial admission of the truth of the charges against an individual, a criminal inmate's right to contest the validity of such a plea is usually, but not invariably, foreclosed. Blackledge v. Allison, 431 U.S. 63, 97 S.Ct. 1621 (1977). Therefore, statements made during a guilty plea should be considered conclusive unless a criminal inmate presents valid reasons why he should be allowed to depart from the truth of his statements. Crawford v. U.S., 519 F.2d 317 (4th Cir. 1975); Edmonds v. Lewis, 546 F.2d 566 (4th Cir. 1976).

A defendant who enters a plea on the advice of counsel may only attack the voluntary and intelligent character of the plea by showing that counsel's representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness and that there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's errors, the defendant would not have pled guilty, but would have insisted on going to trial. Roscoe v. State, 345 S.C.16, 546 S.E.2d 417 (2001); Richardson v. State, 310 S.C. 360, 426 S.E.2d 795 (1993).

The Applicant's alleges his plea was involuntarily entered. This Court finds that this allegation is conclusively refuted by the record. At the guilty plea hearing, the Applicant testified that he was not under the influence of any alcohol or drugs, other than medications that helped him understand what was occurring around him. (Transcript p. 16 line 5). Judge Cole informed Applicant of the maximum penalty of carjacking and armed robbery (Transcript p. 10 line 14; p. 12 line 15), and informed him of his right to remain silent as well as his right to a jury trial and other associated jury trial rights. (Transcript p. 6 line 5- p. 9 line 14). Applicant subsequently affirmed

that he was guilty of both carjacking and armed robbery (Transcript p. 10 line 10; p. 12 line 11), and he agreed with the facts of the case as stated by the solicitor. (Transcript p. 20 lines 7 and 9). Applicant stated "I just want to get this over with so [victim] ain't got to keep standing over there and getting put through more of it. I'm very shameful for what I have done to her. And I know what I done was wrong. She was just trying to be a good citizen. And I just flipped out. And that's no excuse." (Transcript p. 16 line 24- p. 17 line 4). Not once during the guilty plea did the Applicant explain to Judge Cole that Counsel coerced him into pleading guilty or that he did not understand the proceedings.

This Court further finds that Applicant has failed to carry his burden of proving that his guilty plea was not freely and voluntarily entered. The overwhelming evidence in the record reflects that the plea was knowingly and voluntarily entered. Boykin v. Alabama, 395 U.S. 238 (1969); Vickery v. State, 258 S.C. 33, 186 S.E.2d 827 (1972). Because a guilty plea is a solemn, judicial admission of the truth of the charges against an individual, a criminal inmate's right to contest the validity of such a plea is usually, but not invariably, foreclosed. Blackledge v. Allison, 431 U.S. 63 (1977). Therefore, statements made during a guilty plea should be considered conclusive unless a criminal inmate presents valid reasons why he should be allowed to depart from the truth of his statements. Crawford v. U.S., 519 F.2d 317 (4th Cir. 1975); Edmonds v. Lewis, 546 F.2d 566 (4th Cir. 1976). The Applicant showed no reason why he should be allowed to depart from the truth of the statements he made during his guilty plea hearing. This Court finds the Applicant's testimony at the PCR hearing lacked credibility. Therefore, this Court finds that Applicant's guilty plea was freely and voluntarily entered.

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Accordingly, this Court finds the Applicant has failed to prove the first prong of the Strickland test – that Counsel failed to render reasonably effective assistance under prevailing professional norms. The Applicant failed to present specific and compelling evidence that Counsel committed either errors or omissions in his representation of the Applicant.

This Court also finds the Applicant has failed to prove the second prong of Strickland – that he was prejudiced by Counsel's performance. This Court concludes the Applicant has not met his burden of proving counsel failed to render reasonably effective assistance. Therefore, these allegations are denied.

CONCLUSION

Based on all the foregoing, this Court finds and concludes that the Applicant has not established any constitutional violations or deprivations that would require this court to grant his application. Therefore, this application for post conviction relief must be denied and dismissed with prejudice.

This Court advises Applicant that he must file and serve a notice of appeal within thirty (30) days from the receipt by counsel of written notice of entry of judgment to secure the appropriate appellate review. See Rule 203, SCACR. Pursuant to Austin v. State, 305 S.C. 453 (1991), an Applicant has a right to an appellate counsel's assistance in seeking review of the denial of PCR. Rule 71.1(g), SCRCP, provides that if the applicant wishes to seek appellate review, PCR counsel must serve and file a Notice of Appeal on the Applicant's behalf. Your attention is directed to South Carolina Appellate Court Rule 243 for appropriate procedures for appeal.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED:

1. That the Application for Post-Conviction Relief must be denied and dismissed with prejudice; and

2. The Applicant must be remanded to the custody of the Respondent.

AND IT IS SO ORDERED!

Clifton B. Newman
Presiding Circuit Court Judge
Eighth Judicial Circuit

April 25, 2013

Lexington, South Carolina