

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
IN THE SUPREME COURT

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Appeal from Dorchester County
DeAndrea G. Benjamin, Circuit Court Judge

S.C. Supreme Court

Anthony Sanders,

Petitioner,

vs.

State of South Carolina,

Respondent.

**RETURN TO PETITION FOR
WRIT OF CERTIORARI**

ALAN WILSON
Attorney General

DAVID SPENCER
Senior Assistant Attorney General
Bar # 58671

Post Office Box 11549
Columbia, SC 29211
Telephone: (803) 734-3727

ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT

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ISSUE PRESENTED

The PCR court did not err in dismissing Petitioner's PCR application where the record firmly established his knowing and voluntary waiver of the right to file a PCR application pursuant to agreement with the prosecution.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Petitioner Sanders was indicted for three counts of murder. The prosecution was seeking the death penalty against Sanders. Sanders was represented by a team of four attorneys. On January 21, 2010, a hearing was held before the Honorable R. Markley Dennis, Jr., to place on record a “Contractual Consent Order to Waive Rights to a Jury Trial” and to establish that Sanders was freely and voluntarily entering the agreement, which included Sanders’ waiver of: (1) the right to a jury trial, (2) the right to a direct appeal, and (3) the right to seek post-conviction relief (PCR).

Sanders proceeded to a bench trial before Judge Dennis on March 8, 2010, and Judge Dennis found Sanders guilty as charged for all three counts of murder. Judge Dennis sentenced Sanders to life imprisonment.

Sanders first attempted to violate the agreement by filing a *pro se* notice of appeal, but the appeal was dismissed for failure to provide the Court of Appeals a proof of service. Sanders filed an application for post-conviction relief (PCR) on January 6, 2011. The State filed its return on May 4, 2011. On May 17, 2012, the State filed a motion to dismiss the PCR application pursuant to the terms of the prior consent order. The matter was heard before the Honorable DeAndrea Benjamin on May 22, 2012. Judge Benjamin granted the State’s motion to dismiss the application by order dated August 20, 2012. Sanders filed a motion for reconsideration on August 30, 2012. Judge Benjamin denied the motion for reconsideration.

ARGUMENT

The PCR court did not err in dismissing Petitioner's PCR application where the record firmly established his knowing and voluntary waiver of the right to file a post-conviction relief application pursuant to an agreement with the prosecution.

Petitioner Sanders complains that the PCR court erred in dismissing his PCR application pursuant to the agreement he had entered into with the State to waive his right to file a PCR application. However, the PCR court did not err in granting the State's motion as Sanders failed to offer a specific reason why his agreement was not voluntarily entered into.

The agreement is permissible under Spoone v. State, 379 S.C. 138, 665 S.E.2d 605 (2008). In Spoone, this Court found permissible the terms of a plea agreement where Spoone waived the right to file a direct appeal and the right to file a PCR application. In exchange, the State refrained from pursuing the death penalty. Like the instant case, Spoone filed a PCR application and the State moved for dismissal based on the written agreement. This Court declared "such a waiver will be held effective only if it is knowing and voluntary." Id., 379 S.C. at 142, 665 S.E.2d at 607.

This Court then examined the facts and circumstances of Spoone's case as follows:

Looking at the particular facts and circumstances of the instant case, including: (1) the background, experience and conduct of the accused, (2) the text of the plea agreement, and (3) the transcript of the plea hearing, we find petitioner's waiver was voluntarily, knowingly, and intelligently made. Although petitioner only has a ninth grade education, the text of the written plea agreement was straightforward. Furthermore, the plea colloquy shows

that the trial court specifically asked petitioner about the waiver both in the language of the plea agreement, as well as in plain language. Petitioner was represented by two attorneys at the trial level. Both lawyers attended the plea hearing and both signed the written plea agreement, along with petitioner himself.

Id., 379 S.C. at 143-44, 665 S.E.2d at 608.

In the instant case, Judge Dennis engaged in an extensive colloquy with Sanders and his attorneys concerning the terms of the agreement to ensure Sanders understood the terms of the agreement and that he wanted to enter into the agreement.

At the outset of the hearing, Assistant Solicitor Jennings explained the terms of the agreement as follows:

that in return for the State asking that he would be sentenced from thirty years to life that he and his counsel are willing to waive that right to a jury trial, in addition to waiving any right to appeal Your Honor's – whatever that verdict might be – nor could he bring any PCR action.

App. p. 4, lines 14-21.

Attorney Boyd Young responded as follows:

. . . the agreement before the Court signed by all the parties, the offer, uh, that the State would be basically withdrawing seeking the death penalty. The consideration is that withdrawal. We agree that in exchange for that to a trial before Your Honor, putting the burden on the evidence. We also agree to waive any appeal and/or PCRs from that trial. We accept their offer and are ready to proceed.

App. p. 5, lines 1-9. Young verified that he and co-counsel discussed the agreement fully with Sanders. App. pp. 5-6. Judge Dennis went over in detail the waiver of the right to direct appeal with Sanders. App. pp. 11-12.

Judge Dennis specifically went over Sanders' right to post-conviction relief and the fact he was waiving this right. Judge Dennis verified that the reason Sanders wanted to waive that right was to avoid the death penalty as a possible punishment, which Sanders verified was a real benefit from his perspective. App. pp. 13-15. Judge Dennis' colloquy ensured that Sanders was making the decision voluntarily and that Sanders was comfortable with the decision. Judge Dennis asked Sanders if there was any reason from Sanders' vantage point that Judge Dennis should not accept the agreement, and Sanders responded in the negative. App. pp. 17-18.

Judge Dennis noted the following:

And, Mr. Sanders, if the State is able to convince me beyond a reasonable doubt of each element of the crime or crimes charged, then of course it would be closure for you and for the family, too, because that will be the last proceeding in this process. Do you understand that?

App. p. 21, lines 5-11. Sanders indicated that he understood. App. p. 21, line 12.

Approximately six weeks after Sanders entered into the agreement, Judge Dennis asked Sanders at the beginning of the bench trial whether he still desired to go forward based on the consent order. Sanders indicated he still wished to go forward. App. pp. 37-38.

As in Spoone, the consent agreement itself is straightforward and not difficult to understand. App. pp. 307-310. The text of the agreement itself is barely more than two pages. In relevant part, the agreement indicates the following:

Anthony Sanders agrees to waive absolutely and unconditionally all future rights to appeal any legal issues associated with this case or conviction in State or Federal Court. The Defendant waives the right to appeal any

evidentiary rulings made by the Honorable R. Markley Dennis. The Defendant also waives the right to appeal the verdict and sentence entered by the trial judge. This waiver applies to all rights of judicial review, including, but not limited to direct appeal, post-conviction proceedings, or habeas corpus proceedings in State or Federal Court.

App. pp. 307-308.

The consent order further states the following:

e) He understands the provisions of this consent order are permanent and irrevocable such that he will not have a jury decide his guilt for the above referenced indictments, and he will never be entitled to appeal any aspect of this case.

App. p. 308.

PCR counsel asserted the following claims in response to the State's motion:

The circumstances that surround the waiver is what is questionable as to his knowingly entering – voluntarily, excuse me, entering into it. There was a plea negotiations [sic] prior to the contract – him signing this contractual waiver that essentially discussed for a few months prior to and he was faced with three options, one of which was this contractual waiver. He signed it within an hour of seeing it, talking to his attorneys. He asked if he could still appeal. That, to me, shows that he did not know what everything means, that he was actually contracting away his rights, and the caption is entitled Waiver of Jury Trial. It doesn't indicate anything else, and that may not be significant but to Mr. Sanders **it may be** because that may be the one thing that is stuck in his head. He **may** not have realized that he waived his right to a direct appeal and to this post-conviction relief hearing.

App. p. 344, lines 5-21 (emphasis added).

Accordingly, it appears that Sanders is contending the PCR court erred because he should have a hearing because he **may** have not realized he waived his right to direct appeal and post-conviction relief. This position is untenable. The record is replete

with references to the waiver of direct review and post-conviction relief and Sanders' indication that he understood the rights he was waiving. In the time between the conference and bench trial, Sanders had six weeks to decide if it was a decision he regretted. Yet, Sanders indicated to Judge Dennis before the bench trial that he still wished to proceed with the agreement. Sanders never affirmatively claimed he did not understand the agreement and the waivers.

Sanders attempts to support his argument by claiming that the prosecution's case was weak. However, even viewing the evidence as summarized by Sanders in his petition, the State easily presented sufficient evidence for a jury to convict Sanders. Accordingly, the contract represented a reasonable allocation of risk where the very real possibility of the death penalty was removed for Sanders yet the State was still required to convince a fact finder of Sanders' guilt.¹

This is the principal weakness in Sanders' argument. The argument appears to be premised on the belief the agreement is somehow facially unreasonable and Sanders **may** have misunderstood something, although he fails to affirmatively state what he misunderstood. However, the record is clear that it is an advantageous agreement for Sanders, that the terms of the agreement were made abundantly clear to him, and that he

¹ In some cases, it actually may be to the defendant's advantage to waive a jury trial. See Waiver, after not guilty plea, of jury trial in felony case, 9 A.L.R.4th 695 (1981) § 2[b] ("It may be obvious to defense counsel in a given case that it is to his client's advantage to submit a felony charge for trial by the court – where facts are particularly loathsome, where pretrial publicity has been so wide spread as to make change of venue ineffective, or where there is a possibility that the defendant's past record, attitude, or appearance seem clearly to suggest to counsel that the potential for conviction is more likely before a jury than before a judge.").

understood the terms of the agreement. Therefore, the PCR court did not err in dismissing the PCR application. Accordingly, this petition should be denied.

CONCLUSION

For the above stated reasons, the petition should be denied. If this Court sees fit to grant this petition for writ of certiorari, respondent would request permission under the rules to fully brief the issues contained herein.

Respectfully submitted,

ALAN WILSON
Attorney General

DAVID SPENCER
Senior Assistant Attorney General
Bar # 68571

BY: 

ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT

Office of the Attorney General
Post Office Box 11549
Columbia, South Carolina 29211

Columbia, South Carolina
November 18, 2013



ALAN WILSON
ATTORNEY GENERAL

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S.C. Supreme Court

The Honorable Daniel E. Shearouse
Clerk, South Carolina Supreme Court
Post Office Box 11330
Columbia, South Carolina 29211

Re: **Anthony Sanders v. The State of South Carolina**
Appellate Case No. 2012-213162

Dear Mr. Shearouse:

Enclosed for filing are the original and six (6) copies of Respondent's Return to Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

Sincerely,

David Spencer
Senior Assistant Attorney General
S.C. Bar No. 58671

MEH/ko
Enclosures

cc: Susan B. Hackett, Esquire, Appellate Defense