

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
IN THE COURT OF APPEALS

Appeal from Greenville County

G. Edward Welmaker, Circuit Court Judge

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SC Court of Appeals

THE STATE,

RESPONDENT,

V.

JAMES ALLEN JOHNSON,

APPELLANT

APPELLATE CASE NO. 2013-001314

INITIAL BRIEF OF APPELLANT

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STATEMENT OF ISSUE ON APPEAL

Did the admission of a statement spawned from a two-phase interrogation of a mentally retarded suspect who did not receive Miranda¹ warnings until after he made incriminating statements violate state law, the Fifth Amendment, Miranda, and Missouri v. Seibert?²

¹ Miranda v. Arizona, 384 U.S. 436 (1966).

² Missouri v. Seibert, 542 U.S. 600 (2004).

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On September 13, 2011, a Greenville County grand jury indicted appellant for homicide by child abuse. On June 13, 2013, appellant was tried before the Honorable G. Edward Welmaker and a jury. Tr. 1. Kris Hodge represented the State. Tr. 1. Dorothy Manigault represented appellant. Tr. 1. The jury convicted appellant. Tr. 624, ll: 4 – 10. Judge Welmaker sentenced appellant to sixty-two years' imprisonment. Tr. 631, l. 23 – 632, l. 1. After timely filing and service of the notice of appeal, this appeal follows.

ARGUMENT

The admission of a statement spawned from a two-phase interrogation of a mentally retarded suspect who did not receive Miranda warnings until after he made incriminating statements violated state law, the Fifth Amendment, Miranda, and Missouri v. Seibert.

Introduction

In this case, the police interrogated a mentally retarded suspect using, as the solicitor candidly identified it, the “two phase” interrogation tactic condemned by the United States Supreme Court in Missouri v. Seibert and the South Carolina Supreme Court in State v. Navy.³ Appellant James Allen Johnson (“Johnson”) is mentally retarded. Tr. 48, ll. 8 – 18. The State prosecuted him for the death of his girlfriend’s child (“Minor”). At the time of Minor’s injuries, both Johnson and his girlfriend, Georgia Ann Sprouse (“Sprouse”) were at home with Minor. Tr. 521, ll. 1 – 5. Both Johnson and Sprouse initially told police that Johnson was in the bathroom when Minor choked on tea and stopped breathing. Tr. 521, ll. 6 – 20. Tr. 192, l. 24 – 193, l. 10.

After the pathologist ruled Minor’s death a homicide, Sprouse, who had a long history with DSS, changed her story to incriminate Johnson. Tr. 492, ll. 3 – 12. Tr. 455, ll. 10 -18. Tr. 341, ll. 5 – 14. The police brought Johnson to the station and three officers questioned him for an indeterminate amount of time, no shorter than one and a half hours, and possibly for as long as four or five hours. Tr. 410, ll. 15 – 25. Tr. 477, ll. 10 – 13. Tr. 586, l. 23 – 587, l. 3. Johnson then admitted suffocating the child. Tr. 463, l. 20 – 464, l. 3.

³ The solicitor asked one of the police officers present at the interrogation, “Did you hear the Defendant telling Investigator Miller basically what happened in this case? **Two phases?** I guess, **two phases?** Did you hear him give a statement?” Tr. 590, l. 24 – 591, l. 1 (emphasis added). The officer responded, “Yeah. I heard **both phases.**” Tr. 591, l. 2 (emphasis added).

Only after this admission, and for the first time, the police read Johnson his Miranda warnings. Tr. 464, ll. 7 – 12. They continued questioning him, using the information they had already obtained to draft a written statement for Johnson to sign. Tr. 467, ll. 4 – 15. Johnson misspelled his own name on the statement. R. __ (State’s Ex. 41; Court’s Ex. 1). He and his brother testified that he was heavily intoxicated that day. Tr. 104, ll. 2 – 15. Tr. 117, l. 19 – 118, l. 1. Johnson said he did not remember giving the statement. Tr. 103, ll. 11 – 13.

Relevant Facts

Appellant Johnson⁴ was twenty-eight years old at the time of trial. Tr. 513, ll. 21 – 22. The court held a Blair hearing before the trial began regarding Johnson’s mental competency. Dr. Richard Frierson testified that Johnson is mentally retarded. Tr. 48, ll. 8 – 18. Johnson’s IQ is below seventy. Tr. 48, ll. 8 – 18. The doctor found that Johnson’s ability to use the word “prosecute” was “pretty surprising given his intellectual functioning.” Tr. 51, ll. 2 – 10. Dr. Frierson stated that Johnson’s retardation prevented him from maintaining competitive employment and speculated that “he might be able to go pick up trash somewhere, but he’s not going to be able to support himself with work.” Tr. 51, ll. 11 – 22. Johnson took two medications for major depression. App. 47, ll. 10 – 15. Johnson has never had a driver’s license. Tr. 520, ll. 18 – 21. Dr. Frierson opined Johnson was competent to stand trial.

Co-defendant Sprouse was Minor’s mother. Tr. 283, ll. 6 – 10. She was thirty-two years old at the time of trial. Tr. 282, ll. 10 – 12. She had three children by three different fathers. Tr. 282, l. 22 – 283, l. 23. She was charged in this case with homicide by child

⁴ Some of the witnesses refer to Johnson by the nickname, “Parker.” Tr. 224, ll. 2 – 7.

abuse, aiding and abetting, and accessory after the fact.⁵ Tr. 282, ll. 19 – 21. From her testimony, it was apparent that Sprouse had a long history with DSS, with “at least three different” investigations. Tr. 341, ll. 5 – 14. Minor was taken from Sprouse immediately when Minor was born because she tested positive for marijuana. Tr. 287, ll. 4 – 21. Sprouse also testified that “every time that I’ve had my kids took” and “[e]ach time that I’ve had a DSS case” it involved her drug addiction. Tr. 289, ll. 5 – 21. Sprouse eventually got Minor and her other daughter back after spending nine months at a drug rehabilitation facility. Tr. 288, ll. 1 – 17.

Sprouse met Johnson through her sister. Tr. 292, l. 17 – 18. The same day she met Johnson, she invited him to move in with her and they began a romantic relationship. Tr. 293, ll. 1 – 13. Sprouse depended upon government assistance and child support. Tr. 294, l. 23 – 295, l. 4. She was abusing drugs before she met Johnson. Tr. 293, ll. 22 – 24. She knew that Johnson received a disability check because of his mental retardation. Tr. 295, ll. 5 – 7. Tr. 517, ll. 10 – 14. Because of Johnson’s retardation, he had to have a payee for his disability payments. Tr. 517, ll. 10 – 14. Johnson’s brother testified that Johnson is not allowed to live by himself. Transcript 120, ll. 5 – 7.

At the end of April 2011, Johnson, Sprouse, and Sprouse’s daughters moved in with Sprouse’s friend, Crystal Inman (“Inman”). Tr. 560, ll. 3 – 23. Inman was married and had three children. Tr. 209, ll. 15 – 210, l. 8. Inman and Sprouse had been “childhood friends forever.” Tr. 211, ll. 5 – 9. Inman never noticed Sprouse or Johnson hitting the children other than “a pop on the hand and put in a corner.” Tr. 225, ll. 8 – 18.

⁵ The Department of Corrections website reflects that Sprouse received a fourteen year sentence shortly after Johnson’s trial ended.

May 25, 2011: Minor is Taken to the Hospital

On the afternoon of May 25, 2011, Inman asked Sprouse to ride with her to pick up her children from school, but Sprouse declined because she “was too high and [she] was tired.” Tr. 305, ll. 3 – 11. Sprouse and Johnson were home alone with Minor and Sprouse’s other daughter (“Sister”). Tr. 521, ll. 1 – 5. Minor was approximately one-and-a-half years old and Sister was approximately two-and-a-half years old. Tr. 283, ll. 6 – 10.

Sprouse gave several different versions of what happened to Minor that afternoon, but she told the first police officer who arrived at the scene that Minor “was drinking tea and she started choking and she threw up.” Tr. 192, l. 24 – 193, l. 10. The police found a spot on the rug that they suspected was vomit. Tr. 428, l. 19 – 429, l. 4. Johnson told the same police officer, “I don’t know what happened. I was in the bathroom.” Tr. 193, ll. 5 – 7. Johnson was the one who called 911. Tr. 526, ll. 7 – 12.

Johnson testified that the children were playing in the living room when he went to the bathroom. Tr. 521, ll. 6 – 20. While he was in the bathroom, Sprouse yelled to him that Minor was not breathing. Tr. 521, ll. 6 – 20. When Johnson got to the living room, he saw that Minor was “already discolored.” Tr. 521, ll. 6 – 20. Sprouse, Johnson, and Inman had been smoking marijuana that morning and Sprouse originally wanted to attempt to revive Minor themselves because she was afraid that if they called 911, the authorities would find the marijuana and she would lose her children. Tr. 524, l. 16 – 526, l. 12. Johnson called 911 while Sprouse hid the marijuana. Tr. 524, ll. 16 – 20. A firefighter was the first to arrive and saw Sprouse performing chest compressions and Johnson “doing mouth-to-mouth rescue breathing on the child.” Tr. 140, ll. 10 – 15. Emergency personnel took Minor to the hospital. Tr. 150, ll. 6 – 16.

The Medical Evidence

The paramedics were able to regain a pulse. Tr. 188, l. 22 – 189, l. 10. At the hospital, Minor was placed on a ventilator. Tr. 360, ll. 22 – 24. Tragically, Minor suffered a “severe neurologic injury.” Tr. 362, ll. 9 – 14. Minor was taken off life-support on May 27, 2011, and died. Tr. 280, ll. 6 – 8.

Dr. Mary Fran Croswell, who said she was “a child abuse pediatrician,” examined Minor while she was on life-support. Tr. 360, ll. 13 – 17. She testified that the child had multiple bruises on her body. Tr. 362, l. 9 – 367, l. 6. Dr. Croswell opined that the location of some of the bruises raised “red flags for an abusive injury.” Tr. 367, ll. 7 – 16.

The pathologist who performed the autopsy, Dr. Michael Ward, also found numerous bruises. Tr. 488, l. 5 – 489, l. 25. Despite the bruises, the autopsy revealed “no trauma” to any of the child’s internal organs. Tr. 499, ll. 11 – 18. The pathologist opined that the child died of lack of oxygen to the brain. Tr. 496, ll. 1 - 19. There was no direct trauma to the brain. Tr. 496, ll. 1 - 19.

One specific injury inside the child’s mouth led the pathologist to conclude that she had been suffocated. The “frenulum” is the “little piece of tissue that attaches the lip to the upper gum. It’s in the very midline of your lip.” Tr. 489, ll. 20 – 22. Minor’s frenulum on the upper portion of her lip was torn. Tr. 489, ll. 22 – 24. The pathologist also saw “a small amount of hemorrhage within the mucosa of the inside of her mouth.” Tr. 489, ll. 23 – 25. The torn frenulum signified to the pathologist that the child had been smothered with “pressure placed against the upper lip, basically covering the mouth.” Tr. 492, ll. 3 – 12. The pathologist also said it would have been medically impossible for the child to have died from choking on tea and vomiting. Tr. 503, ll. 4 – 7.

The pathologist stated that a torn frenulum was not an injury he had seen caused by CPR. Tr. 492, ll. 17 – 19. Even though Dr. Croswell was not able to examine the child's frenulum, she still opined that it would have been caused by "some type of blunt force trauma" or a "suffocation type of injury." Tr. 370, ll. 20 – 23. Dr. Croswell also stated that she "would not expect to see" a torn frenulum from CPR. Tr. 373, ll. 5 – 10. In addition to the CPR performed by Sprouse and Johnson, the firefighter who was the first to respond to the scene checked Minor's airway and tried to hear or feel whether she was breathing. Tr. 144, ll. 6 – 15. The firefighters initially used a bag valve mask to help Minor breathe. Tr. 144, ll. 16 – 21.

The first paramedic to testify said that, in the moving ambulance, his partner "intubated the child correctly and did the correct procedure, in the correct manner, the correct depth. I mean, everything was, **everything was textbook.**" Tr. 175, ll. 14 – 18 (emphasis added). When asked if intubating the child could have caused a tear in the frenulum, the first paramedic stated, "There was not enough force. There was not – he didn't apply enough force to do that, no." Tr. 175, ll. 19 – 22. However, the paramedic who actually intubated the child testified that the first intubation came loose and "probably pulled up past the vocal cords." Tr. 188, ll. 1 – 21. They removed the tube, continued alternate ventilation, and then "attempted one other time to intubate the child and noted some edema or some swelling in the throat." Tr. 188, ll. 12 – 16. They abandoned their second attempt to intubate the child. Tr. 188, ll. 12 – 21. He said it was "a rough ride" to the hospital. Tr. 188, ll. 3 – 5. "The roads are – you know, the roads aren't the greatest in the world and with a firefighter driving sometimes, especially with a twenty-month old in the back, the drive can get kind of rough." Tr. 188, ll. 5 – 8. This paramedic also claimed that intubation could

not have caused any injury to the frenulum. Tr. 187, ll. 17 – 24. At the hospital, ventilation tubes were inserted into Minor’s airway. Tr. 360, ll. 22 – 24.

Sprouse’s Changing Story

Sprouse gave three versions of what happened to Minor. Sprouse told the first police officer who arrived at the scene that Minor “was drinking tea and she started choking and she threw up.” Tr. 192, l. 24 – 193, l. 10. She told another deputy at the scene that “the child walked over to the table where there was a glass of tea, took a drink of tea, started choking, threw up” and then they called 911. Tr. 201, ll. 8 – 17. This deputy released Sprouse and Johnson from the scene and they went to the hospital. Tr. 203, ll. 9 – 15. She again told an investigator at the hospital that the child choked on tea and gave a written statement. Tr. 316, ll. 7 – 9. In her statement, she described the cup from which the child drank, described Minor throwing up and holding her until Sprouse realized Minor was not breathing, and described yelling for Johnson who was on the toilet. Tr. 326, l. 12 – 328, l. 16.

The next day, Sprouse changed her story. Tr. 316, ll. 10 – 16. This interview also took place at the hospital. Tr. 428, ll. 15 – 22. She told the police that she was in the kitchen when the child began choking. Tr. 323, l. 15 – 324, l. 3. She also now placed Johnson in the room with Minor when she started choking instead of in the bathroom. Tr. 448, l. 23 – 449, l. 5.

Between Sprouse’s second and third versions, the child died and the autopsy was performed. Tr. 449, ll. 23 – 24. Tr. 450, l. 22 – 454, l. 14. Christopher Miller (“Miller”) was the lead investigator on the case. Tr. 78, ll. 17 – 20. He attended the autopsy on May

28 and learned the pathologist's preliminary finding that Minor's death was a homicide resulting from suffocation. Tr. 450, l. 22 – 451, l. 22.

On June 2, Investigator Miller and two other officers located Sprouse at the mortuary and took her to the law enforcement center for questioning. Tr. 454, ll. 10 – 455, l. 5. They told Sprouse the results of the autopsy and that her story was “just not making sense.” Tr. 455, ll. 1 – 5. Investigator Miller told Sprouse, “We need the truth,” and “pressed her pretty hard.” Tr. 455, l. 4. Tr. 455, ll. 19 – 22. Sprouse then spun her third version of events—that she had been asleep from smoking marijuana and was awakened by Johnson who told her that Minor was not breathing. Tr. 455, ll. 10 – 18. Sprouse used this third version as her trial testimony. Tr. 305, ll. 3 – 306, l. 15. The police gave her a ride back to the mortuary. Tr. 456, ll. 16 – 19.

Jackson v. Denno Hearing: The June 2, 2011, Interrogation of Johnson

The police witnesses were vague about the timeline of events surrounding the interrogation of Johnson on June 2. What is known for certain is that at 10:02 PM, Johnson signed a Miranda waiver. R. ___ (Court's Ex. 1). What is not known is how long Johnson was interrogated before the police read him his rights.

During the Denno hearing, Investigator Miller told Judge Welmaker that he started speaking to Johnson “probably some time right before ten o'clock.” Tr. 86, l. 21 – 87, l. 4. However, Johnson was already at the station when Investigator Miller returned from the mortuary. Tr. 96, ll. 10 – 23. He described Johnson as making incriminating statements after returning from a bathroom break and once these statements were made, Investigator Miller read him his rights. Tr. 88, l. 4 – 89, l. 11. During cross-examination at the Denno

hearing, Investigator Miller allowed “about forty-five minutes to an hour” of “talking” before the bathroom break. Tr. 98, ll. 13 – 18.

Before the bathroom break, Investigator Miller confronted Johnson with Sprouse’s statement from earlier in the day. Tr. 88, ll. 4 – 13. Investigator Miller escorted Johnson to the bathroom. Tr. 88, l. 4 – 89, l. 11. When they returned, Investigator Miller told Johnson “that there was things that just didn’t make sense, that I, you know, I needed the truth to come out.” Tr. 88, ll. 20 – 22. He used the “sympathy” technique to question Johnson. Tr. 92, l. 12 – 93, l. 4. He told Johnson that “sometimes accidents happen” and “that we do things sometimes that we don’t intend to happen.” Tr. 92, l. 12 – 93, l. 4. “Sometimes we lose our temper.” Tr. 92, l. 12 – 93, l. 4. “I explained that I have kids and, you know, that I know what it’s like to have a kid that’s crying that just will not stop. And, you know, and that I understood where he was—why he was so frustrated.” Tr. 92, l. 12 – 93, l. 4.

Johnson then supposedly told the three policemen in the room that he threw a toy at Minor’s head which caused her to cry. Tr. 88, l. 4 – 89, l. 11. Minor would not stop crying and fearing that it would awaken Sprouse, Johnson told the policemen that “he held his hands over her nose and mouth to make her be quiet, and then she became unresponsive.” Tr. 88, l. 4 – 89, l. 11. Investigator Miller then read Johnson his rights. Tr. 88, l. 4 – 89, l. 11. The policemen typed up a statement and had Johnson initial and sign it. Tr. 89, l. 5 – 93, l. 19. R. ___ (State’s Ex. 41; Court’s Ex. 1). He was then placed under arrest and taken to jail. Tr. 94, l. 14 – 95, l. 21.

The other officer present during the interrogation was Investigator Jennings Autrey (“Autrey”). Tr. 61, ll. 15 – 19. Investigator Autrey confirmed that Johnson was already at the station when he and Investigator Miller returned from dropping Sprouse off at the

mortuary. Tr. 62, ll. 3 – 13. During the Denno hearing Investigator Autrey guessed the entire interview lasted an hour and a half to two hours. Tr. 74, l. 20 – 75, l. 2. He conceded that Johnson “was a possible suspect at that time.” Tr. 75, ll. 20 – 22. Investigator Autrey confirmed that Johnson did not receive Miranda warnings until after making incriminating statements. Tr. 75, l. 23 – 76, l. 8. During his trial testimony, Investigator Autrey guessed they had been with Johnson for an “[h]our, hour and a half” before Miranda warnings were given. Tr. 410, ll. 15 – 25.

During trial, the State called Deputy Jim Wilson (“Wilson”) as a reply witness.⁶ Tr. 585, ll. 2 – 7. He was present during the questioning of Sprouse at the law enforcement center on June 2. Tr. 454, l. 22 – 455, l. 5. Investigator Miller took Sprouse back to the mortuary and asked Deputy Wilson to fetch Johnson and bring him to the law enforcement center. Tr. 456, l. 16 – 457, l. 12. Investigator Miller testified that he dropped Sprouse off at the mortuary in Greer and then drove straight back to the law enforcement center in Greenville. Tr. 457, ll. 16 – 21. Investigator Miller said that Deputy Wilson was already back at the law enforcement center with Johnson when he returned from the mortuary. Tr. 457, ll. 16 – 21.

Deputy Wilson was not certain about the exact time he picked up Johnson, but recalled several important details: “It was daytime. I don’t remember. It wasn’t early morning, **wasn’t late, late afternoon either, that I remember.**” Tr. 586, l. 23 – 587, l. 3 (emphasis added). Deputy Wilson’s memory that it was not “late, late afternoon” when he picked up Johnson is consistent with Investigator Miller dropping Sprouse off at a mortuary

⁶ Interestingly, the State did not call Deputy Wilson during the Denno hearing. He was called as a reply witness to refute Johnson’s testimony that he was intoxicated the night of June 2.

during what was likely regular business hours. No witness testified that Sprouse was at the mortuary after hours for a visitation or any other reason. If Deputy Wilson is correct, that means that Johnson likely arrived at the law enforcement center sometime not “late, late afternoon” between 4:00 PM and 6:00 PM. That meant that Johnson could have been questioned as much as five or six hours before he was given Miranda warnings at 10:02 PM.

The Rulings at Trial

During the pre-trial Denno hearing, which was held after the Blair hearing where the trial judge learned Johnson was mentally retarded, the State offered the testimony of Investigators Miller and Autrey, but not Deputy Wilson. Johnson and his brother, Alex Johnson, also testified. Johnson testified that he did not remember giving the statement on June 2. Tr. 103, ll. 11- 13. According to Johnson, two deputies came to his house and told him he “had to go with them.” Tr. 103, ll. 14 – 17. That day, Johnson smoked marijuana and took approximately ten Xanaxes. Tr. 104, ll. 2 – 15. He took three Xanaxes with him to the police station and took them during his trip to the bathroom. Tr. 104, l. 16 – 105, l. 2. Johnson admitted that the handwriting on the Miranda waiver and the statement were his, but could not remember giving the statement. Tr. 105, l. 3 – 107, l. 10.

Johnson’s brother testified that he saw Johnson approximately an hour before the police took him and Johnson “was heavily intoxicated. He was staggering around, falling around everywhere. Fell off my porch and everything.” Tr. 117, l. 19 – 118, l. 1. The brother expressed disbelief that the police would interrogate his retarded brother without his legal guardian present. Tr. 120, ll. 1 – 4. The brother stated that Johnson is “only twenty-something. But he is not allowed to live by himself or nothing.” Tr. 120, ll. 5 – 7.

Following the conclusion of testimony at the Denno hearing, and without hearing argument, the court recessed for lunch. Tr. 121, ll. 9 – 15. When the court returned from the lunch break, Judge Welmaker immediately ruled on the admissibility of the statements. Tr. 121, l. 18 – 122, l. 4. The trial judge held that after weighing the testimony, he found that Johnson’s statement was freely and voluntarily given. Tr. 121, l. 18 – 122, l. 4. The trial judge did not ask for argument from either the State or the defense before or after ruling. Tr. 121, l. 18 – 122, l. 4. Johnson renewed his objection to the statement during the trial and the renewed objection was denied. Tr. 396, ll. 16 – 21. Tr. 402, ll. 17 – 23. Tr. 409, ll. 14 – 20.

Discussion

In Missouri v. Siebert, 542 U.S. 600 (2004), the United States Supreme Court condemned a deliberate practice used in police departments throughout the country meant to circumvent Miranda. Siebert at 610-12 and n.2. The Court cited the Police Law Institute’s manual which instructed officers to use a “two-stage interrogation” and not give Miranda warnings until after arrestees have confessed. Id. at 610. The Court listed multiple sources advising officers on how to obtain confessions and then curing the failure to give Miranda warnings. Id. at 610 n.2.

The Court called this practice “question-first” and rejected the notion that the subsequent giving of Miranda warnings could transmute these confessions into admissible evidence. Id. at 610-13. “By any objective measure . . . it is likely that if the interrogators employ the technique of withholding warnings until after interrogation succeeds in eliciting a confession, the warnings will be ineffective in preparing the suspect for successive interrogation, close in time and similar in content.” Id. at 613.

“After all, the reason that question-first is catching on is as obvious as its manifest purpose, which is to get a confession the suspect would not make if he understood his rights at the outset.” Id. “Upon hearing warnings only in the aftermath of interrogation and just after making a confession, a suspect would hardly think he had a genuine right to remain silent, let alone persist in so believing once the police began to lead him over the same ground again.” Id.

The police in Siebert were surprisingly honest and admitted they were deliberately using the two-phase question-first strategy. Id. at 605-05. While the police made no such honest admission in this case, Siebert recognized that such admissions are unnecessary: “Because the intent of the officer will rarely be as candidly admitted as it was here (even as it is likely to determine the conduct of the interrogation), the focus is on facts apart from intent that show the question-first tactic at work.” Id. at 617 n.6.

The facts cited in Siebert showing the police strategy are present in this case. In Siebert, the Court emphasized the following:

The unwarned interrogation was conducted in the station house, and the questioning was systematic, exhaustive, and managed with psychological skill. When the police were finished there was little, if anything, of incriminating potential left unsaid. The warned phase of questioning proceeded after a pause of only 15 to 20 minutes, in the same place as the unwarned segment.

Id. at 616. The police referred back to the unwarned statements after giving Miranda warnings. Id. The pre-Miranda questioning only lasted “30 to 40 minutes.” Id. at 604-05. Only one officer questioned Siebert. Id.

In this case, three officers interrogated Johnson. Tr. 87, l. 23 – 88, l. 3. Investigator Miller admitted using the subtle tactic of sympathy to interrogate Johnson.

Tr. 92, l. 12 – 93, l. 4. The police confronted Johnson with Sprouse’s contention that he was alone in the room with Minor when she stopped breathing. Tr. 88, ll. 4 – 16. The police knew the findings from the autopsy. Tr. 450, l. 22 – 451, l. 22. If Investigators Miller and Autrey are to be believed, the pre-Miranda interrogation lasted approximately two hours.⁷ Tr. 477, ll. 10 – 13. Tr. 410, ll. 15 – 25. However, if Deputy Wilson’s testimony is to be believed that it “wasn’t late, late afternoon” when he brought Johnson to the law enforcement center, then it is possible that the pre-Miranda interrogation lasted for more than three or four hours. Tr. 586, l. 23 – 587, l. 3. Deputy Wilson’s testimony is consistent with the fact that Investigator Miller dropped Sprouse off at a place of business—the mortuary—and then returned directly to the station house where Johnson and Deputy Wilson were waiting. Tr. 392, l. 9 – 393, l. 7. Finally, unlike Siebert, Johnson is mentally retarded. The facts of this case demonstrate that the the three officers used “question-first” and Johnson’s statements should be suppressed under Seibert.

Johnson Was In Custody

Miranda conditions “the admissibility at trial of any custodial confession on warning a suspect of his rights: failure to give the prescribed warnings and obtain a waiver of rights before custodial questioning generally requires exclusion of any statements obtained.” Seibert at 608. Since Seibert prevents the late Miranda warnings from curing the earlier failure to warn, the State will doubtless attempt to argue that Johnson was not “in custody” when he made his incriminating statements. The State will find ample support for this position among the officers’ words, but little support in their deeds.

⁷ It should be remembered that during his direct testimony at the Denno hearing, Investigator Miller told Judge Welmaker he did not start talking to Johnson until “probably some time right before ten o’clock.” Tr. 86, l. 21 – 87, l. 4.

The talismanic invocation of the words “You’re under arrest” does not determine whether a suspect is in custody and should receive Miranda warnings. “To determine whether a suspect is in custody, the trial court must examine the totality of the circumstances, which include factors such as the place, purpose, and length of interrogation, as well as whether the suspect was free to leave the place of questioning.” State v. Evans, 351 S.C. 579, 583, 582 S.E.2d 407, 410 (2003). “The custodial determination is an objective analysis based on whether a reasonable person would have concluded that he was in police custody.” Id.

In Evans, the defendant made her own way to the police station accompanied by her relatives. Id. at 581, 582 S.E.2d at 408-09. Two police officers took the defendant “into a back office to take her statement.” Id. The police knew that the deadly fire they were investigating started with an accelerant. Id. at n.2. The police told the defendant they did not believe her explanations for the fire. Id. at 581, 582 S.E.2d at 409. The two policemen left the room and sent in a female SLED agent, who used a sympathy tactic. Id. The two women were in the room for forty-five minutes. Id. The SLED agent followed the defendant to the bathroom and waited outside the door. Id.

The Evans Court found that the defendant was in custody even though she was not formally arrested until shortly after making the statement. Id. at 584, 582 S.E.2d at 410. When analyzing whether the defendant was free to leave, the Court emphasized that the SLED agent accompanied her to the restroom and waited outside the door. Id. In this case, Investigator Miller did not wait outside the bathroom door like the SLED agent in Evans, but followed Johnson inside the bathroom. Tr. 462, ll. 3 – 20. The Evans Court emphasized that the interview took place in a back office and that it lasted three hours. Id. Here, the

interrogation was in a back office by three officers, not one, and lasted at least three hours—and perhaps as many as six hours. Finally, the Evans Court found that the police’s purpose was important and used the fact that they challenged the defendant’s story and switched officers to divine the officers’ intent. Id. Here, Johnson was a suspect and was confronted by Sprouse’s statement. Tr. 463, ll. 2 – 13. Unlike Evans, Johnson was brought to the police station by two officers. No one was with the mentally retarded suspect, which shocked Johnson’s brother. Johnson had no driver’s license. Johnson was not free to leave and was in custody.

This case’s facts eerily resemble State v. Navy, 386 S.C. 294, 688 S.E.2d 838 (2010). Navy also concerns a Seibert two-phase interrogation. Kenneth Navy was convicted of suffocating his two year old son. Id. at 296, 688 S.E.2d at 838. EMS responded to Navy’s house and found him giving the child CPR. Id. at 297, 688 S.E.2d at 838. Navy gave an unsatisfactory statement to the police at the hospital that night. Id. The police subsequently met with the pathologist who told them that the child died from suffocation. Id.

With this knowledge in hand, the police took Navy from his house to the police station. Id. He was not formally under arrest. He gave a statement that was not incriminating. Id. at 298, 688 S.E.2d at 839. Questioning continued and police confronted Navy with information from the autopsy. Id. at 298, 688 S.E.2d at 839-40. The Court found that “[a]t this juncture, the nature of the interrogation and respondent’s status changed, and what had begun as a voluntary question and answer session matured into custodial interrogation.” Id. Without giving Miranda warnings, the police ultimately obtained a confession from Navy which they memorialized after having him sign a

Miranda waiver. The Court ruled these statements violated Siebert and were inadmissible. Id. at 301-04, 688 S.E.2d at 841-43.

The police conduct in this case exceeds the transgressions of Navy. All of the factors cited by Navy were present. They “began an unwarned custodial interrogation designed to elicit incriminating information.” Id. at 303, 688 S.E.2d at 842. Two officers questioned Navy; three questioned Johnson. Both men were picked up from their house by the police. Both men were confronted with contradictory evidence. Both sets of officers knew the results of an autopsy. Neither man received Miranda warnings until after they had confessed. Unlike Navy, though, Johnson is mentally retarded and even less capable of protecting himself from these police tactics.

Even seven years after Seibert and five years after this Court’s opinion in Navy⁸, the police in Greenville County were using a playbook the Courts had condemned. As in these cases, the Court should focus on the actions of these officers and ignore their many conclusory recitations that Johnson was free to leave. The refusal to give Miranda warnings in this case requires suppression of Johnson’s statement. This case must be reversed.

⁸ State v. Navy, 370 S.C. 398, 653 S.E.2d 549 (Ct. App. 2006). This Court’s holding that Navy was in custody and that Siebert applied was affirmed by the Supreme Court.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, appellant's conviction must be reversed and this case remanded for a new trial.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Alexander', written over a horizontal line.

David Alexander
Appellate Defender

ATTORNEY FOR APPELLANT

This 8th day of April, 2014.