

 ORIGINAL

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

IN THE SUPREME COURT

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Certiorari to Richland County

Honorable Deadra L. Jefferson, Circuit Court Judge

**RECEIVED**

DEC 15 2017

S.C. SUPREME COURT

THE STATE,

RESPONDENT,

V.

JAMES KEVIN BETHEL,

PETITIONER

APPELLATE CASE NO 2017-000096

Opinion No. 2016-UP-473 (S.C. Ct. App. Filed November 9, 2016)

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BRIEF OF PETITIONER  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**ISSUE PRESENTED**

Whether the Court of Appeals erred in affirming the trial judge's ruling that petitioner was not entitled to an involuntary manslaughter charge because some evidence of malice existed in the case?

## STATEMENT

On October 10, 2012, a Richland County grand jury indicted petitioner James Bethel for murder and attempted murder. R. 815. On November 4, 2013, petitioner was tried before the Honorable Deadra L. Jefferson and a jury. R. 1. Kathryn “Luck” Campbell, Jeremiah Shellenberg, and Meghan Walker represented the State. R. 1. Tristan Shaffer represented petitioner. R. 1. The jury convicted petitioner. R. 797, ll. 14 – 24. Judge Jefferson sentenced petitioner to concurrent terms of thirty and fifty years’ imprisonment. R. 810, l. 22 – 811, l. 7.

On November 9, 2016, the Court of Appeals issued an unpublished opinion affirming petitioner’s convictions. App. 1. The panel consisted of Judges Williams, Thomas, and Geathers. App. 3. The Court did not hear oral argument in this case. App. 2. Petitioner sought rehearing on his first issue on appeal. App. 4. On December 15, 2016, the court denied rehearing. App. 11. On November 15, 2017, this Court granted certiorari.

## ARGUMENT

The Court of Appeals erred in affirming the trial judge's ruling that petitioner was not entitled to an involuntary manslaughter charge because some evidence of malice existed in the case.

### Introduction

In this murder case, the trial judge turned the standard for deciding whether to charge involuntary manslaughter on its head. Instead of examining whether there was any evidence to support an involuntary manslaughter instruction, the trial judge examined whether there was any evidence of malice. During the charge conference, the trial judge stated the test for charging the lesser included offense of murder as follows: “But involuntary manslaughter is really about circumstances where there’s negligence **and there is an utter lack of malice or a failure of proof of malice**, and this case is not – certainly does not factually support it.” R. 666, l. 23 – 667, l. 1 (emphasis added). After an overnight recess, the trial judge persisted in this analysis, stating, “Clearly the evidence in the record is that malice did exist,” and “There is testimony that he unintentionally killed the victim. However, there is evidence of malice. . . .” R. 673, l. 24 – 674, l. 16.

The Court of Appeals erred in affirming because some evidence (especially the defendant’s own testimony) showed that petitioner lawfully armed himself in self-defense, but acted recklessly in handling the gun and fired it unintentionally. A lesser included offense should be charged if there is any evidence to support the instruction. See, e.g., Casey v. State, 305 S.C. 445, 447, 409 S.E.2d 391, 392 (1991). A complete absence of malice entitles a defendant to a directed verdict on murder, but is not required for a defendant to receive a lesser-included offense charge. The conflicting evidence in this case instead created questions of fact requiring submission of multiple charges to the jury.

## **Factual Background**

This case involved a shooting in the parking lot of a strip club. During defense counsel's opening statement, he told the jury that the reason they were in court was "that not all shootings are murders." R. 22, ll. 15 – 19. He conceded that petitioner James Bethel ("Bethel") fired the shot that killed Dwyane Franklin ("Franklin"). R. 23, ll. 1 – 14. But trial counsel told the jury that the State would not have proof of malice. R. 23, l. 22 – 25, l. 11. Therefore, it was apparent at the very beginning of the trial that Bethel's entire strategy was premised on the trial judge would charge lesser-included offenses.

### *The Testimony from the State's Witnesses*

The shooting occurred on August 19, 2012. R. 26 l. 15 – 27, l. 21. The first officer on the scene said that there was a crowd of "maybe a hundred" in the parking lot of the strip club, Mr. Lucky's. R. 30, l. 23 – 31, l. 5. She said they "periodically" get calls from Mr. Lucky's. R. 31, ll. 6 – 15.

The general manager of Mr. Lucky's was Edward Simpkins. R. 32, ll. 15 – 22. He said Mr. Lucky's had "seven or eight" video cameras. R. 33, ll. 6 – 7. Mr. Lucky's had one camera in the lobby and the rest were outside. R. 33, ll. 11 – 18. Through Edward Simpkins, the State introduced an edited version of the video recordings made by the cameras at Mr. Lucky's that night. R. 33, l. 25 – 35, l. 25. State's Exhibit 71. The State played the video and had Edward Simpkins identify some of the people depicted. R. 36, l. 1 – 38, l. 15. He identified Bethel talking to the decedent Franklin. R. 38, ll. 9 – 11.

Edward Simpkins said that "a couple of crowds" were "a little rowdy." R. 39, ll. 10 – 14. He spoke to Bethel. R. 39, ll. 15 – 18. Edward Simpkins separated Franklin and the group with

Bethel. R. 40, ll. 1 – 12. Bethel's group was leaving. R. 40, ll. 1 – 12. Franklin followed the group out of the building and "that's when all the commotion started." R. 40, ll. 1 – 12.

Edward Simpkins did not give a statement to the police that evening. R. 41, ll. 8 – 13. He managed the club with his brother. R. 41, ll. 17 – 19. His mother is the owner. R. 41, ll. 20 – 23. Edward Simpkins could not explain why some of the cameras only showed all-black. R. 43, ll. 4 – 10.

Edward Simpkins said that Mr. Lucky's employs independent contractors to handle their security outside. R. 54, l. 13 – 55, l. 19. The name of the company employed by Mr. Lucky's was "Black Ops Security." R. 54, ll. 17 – 19. Black Ops Security checks IDs and pats people down. R. 55, ll. 10 – 19. Edward Simpkins admitted that law enforcement had to come to Mr. Lucky's at times. R. 55, ll. 20 – 24.

The police collected a total of twelve shell casings from the scene that were of different makes and calibers. R. 77, ll. 14 – 16. There were ten Smith & Wesson .40 caliber casings. R. 77, l. 17 – 22. There was one CBC .380 caliber casing. R. 77, ll. 17 – 22. There was also one RP .45 caliber casing. R. 77, ll. 17 – 22. The .45 caliber casing was collected near the silver Chevy Suburban in the parking lot. R. 86, l. 9 – 87, l. 20. The crime scene investigator testified that he was told "that one of the security officers at the club shot the tire of the vehicle out to prevent the vehicle from leaving the scene." R. 87, ll. 8 – 14. In the back of the Chevy Suburban, the police collected a .380 automatic pistol that was fully loaded. R. 120, l. 14 – 121, l. 6. The police collected jeans from a ditch near Mr. Lucky's. R. 97, ll. 1 – 2. The police found \$1,500.00 in the pocket. R. 88, ll. 5 – 12.

David Richardson "(Richardson)" worked as a bouncer for Mr. Lucky's (but not for Black Ops Security). R. 143, ll. 8 – 11. R. 158, ll. 10 – 13. Richardson described Franklin as "like a

brother.” R. 143, ll. 14 – 15. He was not working at Mr. Lucky’s on the night of the shootings, but went to the club at approximately 2:30 AM. R. 143, l. 24 – 144, l. 11. Franklin’s nickname was “Black.” R. 144, ll. 12 – 15.

Richardson described the security situation at Mr. Lucky’s. R. 144, l. 23 – 145, l. 8. “[A]rmed security” worked outside. R. 144, l. 23 – 145, l. 1. The bouncers worked inside and were not armed. R. 144, l. 23 – 145, l. 4. Franklin was one of the unarmed security bouncers who worked inside. R. 145, ll. 5 – 8.

Franklin pointed out the group of five people who were acting “belligerent” and needed to be ejected from the club. R. 146, l. 5 – 147, l. 16. While Richardson saw Franklin approach the group twice, he did not see him interact with Bethel. R. 147, l. 17 – 148, l. 9. The members of Black Ops Security from outside came into the club to help the inside bouncers escort the group out of Mr. Lucky’s. R. 148, l. 15 – 149, l. 7. According to Richardson, “outside security escorted them out.” R. 149, ll. 3 – 7. The last one of the group out “kind of nudged” Franklin. R. 149, ll. 3 – 9. Richardson said “that caused [Franklin] to go out the door.” R. 149, ll. 10 – 11. Richardson followed to make sure Franklin “wouldn’t get jumped.” R. 149, ll. 16 – 20.

Once outside the club, Richardson described the situation as a “ruckus” with everybody arguing. R. 149, l. 23 – 150, l. 4. One of the members of the group was taunting Franklin. R. 150, ll. 6 – 9. The man, who was wearing a yellow shirt, told Franklin, “oh, I know where you live at, you trying to beef with me. I know where you live at.” R. 150, ll. 6 – 9. R. 164, ll. 15 – 23. The man with the yellow shirt was petitioner’s cousin, Ernest Bethel. R. 410, l. 21 – 411, l. 3. Franklin replied, “Oh, you know where I live at, I’m right here, you know, if you want to do something, I’m right here, I’m right here.” R. 150, ll. 10 – 12. Franklin jumped off the balcony along with Ernest

Bethel. R. 150, ll. 13 – 17. Richardson followed them off the balcony. R. 165, ll. 16 – 22. He turned his hat backwards in case there was a fight. R. 168, ll. 6 – 12.

Richardson saw Franklin and Ernest Bethel “talking to each other” after they left the balcony. R. 151, ll. 1 – 4. The rest of the group was still on the balcony. R. 165, ll. 2 – 12. Somebody sprayed mace. R. 165, ll. 2 – 12. Richardson testified, “**The next thing I know I hear two gunshots. Pow. Pow.**” R. 151, ll. 1 – 8 (emphasis added). Richardson did not see the gunshots; he only heard them. R. 151, ll. 1 – 8. Richardson ducked and ran behind a trash can. R. 151, ll. 11 – 16. Franklin was on the ground and Richardson checked to see if he was breathing, but he was not. R. 151, ll. 19 – 23.

Richardson heard more gunshots. He looked up and saw a person running and one of the security guards shooting at him. R. 152, ll. 1 – 3. The rest of the group, including Ernest Bethel, got in a Chevy Suburban but Richardson prevented them from leaving. R. 152, l. 20 – 153, l. 25. Law enforcement arrived about ten minutes later, but Richardson did not give them a statement until the next day. R. 154, ll. 6 – 12. In the statement he gave, he told the police he heard two or three gunshots. R. 169, l. 5 – 171, l. 7.

William Ingram (“Ingram”) worked for Black Ops Security. R. 174, ll. 6 – 7. He worked the door at Mr. Lucky’s. R. 174, ll. 8 – 14. Ingram remembered the group of bouncers pushing Bethel’s group down the walkway. R. 177, ll. 9 – 15. Ingram said that his “captain” Kendron Hope (“Hope”) sprayed mace. R. 178, ll. 4 – 10. According to Ingram, both Bethel and Franklin were on the balcony when the mace was sprayed. R. 178, ll. 11 – 15. Ingram believed that approximately five to seven seconds elapsed between the mace being sprayed and the shooting. R. 178, l. 25 – 179, l. 6. Hope maced “a short guy, white shirt, khaki’s with a hat.” R. 178, ll. 18 – 20. This person was Troy Griffin. R. 490, ll. 10 – 11.

Ingram confirmed that the man arguing with Franklin was the yellow-shirted Ernest Bethel. R. 182, ll. 20 – 22. He agreed that Franklin jumped over the balcony to go after Ernest Bethel. R. 183, ll. 8 – 24. Ingram believed that Hope was the only person who sprayed mace. R. 185, ll. 5 – 10. Ingram believed petitioner was on the ramp when the mace was sprayed. R. 187, ll. 13 – 18. He agreed that “some of the people got a taste of it.” R. 188, ll. 21 – 25. Ingram confirmed that it was not Franklin’s job to escort someone to their car and that duty belong to “outside security” – Black Ops Security. R. 189, ll. 17 – 21.

Clinton Brown (“Brown”) worked for Black Ops Security. R. 210, ll. 21 – 22. He was in the deck area when “the disturbance happened.” R. 212, ll. 17 – 22. Brown said approximately ten people were being kicked out of the club. R. 213, ll. 15 – 18. He saw Franklin jump over the ramp. R. 216, ll. 12 – 17. Franklin was the first person who jumped over the ramp. R. 217, ll. 15 – 16. Brown said petitioner also jumped over the ramp. R. 217, l. 17 – 19. Brown said he heard two gunshots, attributing the shots to petitioner. R. 218, ll. 1 – 23. Brown saw Hope “discharging his weapon” at petitioner “to try to eliminate the threat.” R. 219, ll. 10 – 15. Brown identified Hope as the member of Black Ops Security who used pepper spray. R. 224, ll. 7 – 13. Brown testified that Ernest Bethel was still on the ramp at the time Franklin jumped over the rail. R. 232, ll. 16 – 233, l. 6.

Hope was in charge of Black Ops Security personnel at Mr. Lucky’s on the evening of the shooting. R. 246, ll. 15 – 21. Hope described Franklin as “more or less the lead bouncer.” R. 247, l. 19 – 248, l. 2. Inside security were not supposed to walk patrons who had been ejected to their cars. R. 292, ll. 11 – 15.

Hope said that Edward Simpkins called his name and told him to eject the defendant’s group. R. 251, ll. 1 – 17. Hope heard arguing between the bouncers and the patrons who were

leaving. R. 251, l. 18 – 252, l. 6. Hope used his pepper spray. R. 251, l. 18 – 252, l. 6. Hope said he only sprayed two people and that the defendant was not one of them. R. 251, l. 18 – 252, l. 8. Hope heard threats going back and forth and remembered Franklin saying, “I’m right here. I’m right here.” R. 253, ll. 9 – 12. Hope claimed he saw petitioner shoot Franklin in the back of the head. R. 254, ll. 1 – 25.

Hope pulled his gun and fired. R. 255, ll. 9 – 12. Hope’s gun was a Glock .40 caliber. R. 286, ll. 12 – 13. He claimed petitioner shot Franklin “multiple times, shooting him in the head and then shooting him as he fell, then turning on Hope and firing. R. 255, ll. 13 – 18. Hope believed petitioner fired “two or three rounds” at Franklin. R. 257, ll. 11 – 17. Petitioner ran and Hope chased him. R. 255, l. 19 – 256, l. 19. They continued to exchange shots and Hope believed that he hit Bethel because Bethel fell. R. 256, ll. 5 – 22. Hope called 911 during the chase. R. 259, ll. 13 – 23. Bethel climbed under a fence and by that point, the police arrived. R. 260, l. 1 – 261, l. 22. Hope emptied one magazine and believed he fired one more shot. R. 287, ll. 16 – 18.

Hope testified that when he uses pepper spray, he aims for an individual’s chest and works his way up to the face. R. 276, ll. 12 – 13. He agreed that the pepper spray he was using can blind someone, cause someone to involuntarily close their eyes, and cause shortness of breath. R. 277, ll. 7 – 278, l. 2.

Hope agreed that petitioner Bethel was not really the aggressor. R. 294, l. 22 – 295, l. 1. Hope described Ernest Bethel as the aggressor. R. 294, ll. 19 – 21. Frederick Simpkins agreed with Hope and described his conversation with petitioner in the lobby of the club as “a peaceful conversation” and “pretty pleasant.” R. 312, ll. 5 – 17. According to Frederick Simpkins, petitioner was helping keep the other people inside the club manageable. R. 311, l. 24 – 312, l. 4. Frederick

Simpkins and petitioner talked about petitioner having “a little get-together party” at the club and said the defendant spent a lot of money. R. 314, ll. 4 – 13.

The pathologist testified that Franklin died from a single gunshot wound to the head. R.391, ll. 7 – 396, l. 16. The bullet recovered from the autopsy was from a .380 caliber bullet. R. 458, l. 21 – 459, l. 3. The police did not find the firearm that fired the bullet. R. 379, l. 18 – 380, l. 1. It was not a contact wound. R. 395, l. 20 – 396, l. 4. The gunshot could have been from as far away as three feet. R. 400, ll. 24 – 25. Franklin was 6’2” tall and weighed 308 pounds. R. 391, ll. 5 – 6. Franklin’s blood alcohol level was .071. R. 397, ll. 4 – 6.

Rodney White (“White”) worked for Black Ops Security and was at the club the night of the shooting. R. 430, ll. 12 – 19. He claimed he saw petitioner shoot Franklin in the head. R. 433, ll. 18 – 23. White was on the deck when Hope sprayed the pepper spray. R. 432, l. 17 – 433, l. 17. He claimed petitioner did not get hit with pepper spray. R. 435, l. 25 – 436, l. 7.

White said it was not common for the bouncers to escort people to their cars. R. 435, ll. 6 – 8. He was not sure whether Franklin jumped over the rail to confront petitioner’s group. R. 435, ll. 3 – 5. Franklin was confronting approximately fifteen people. R. 436, ll. 23 – 25. He agreed that there “was shouting back and forth.” R. 435, ll. 9 – 11.

The police found petitioner at an apartment complex near Mr. Lucky’s. R. 332, ll. 7 – 333, l. 3. Bethel was sitting on the steps bleeding heavily from a wound in his back. R. 333, ll. 1 – 7. EMS arrived and took him to the hospital. R. 333, l. 20 – 334, l. 7.

#### *The Testimony from the Defense Witnesses*

Troy Griffin (“Griffin”) testified for the defense. He was with the defendant the night of the shooting. R. 490, ll. 6 – 7. He wore a Gamecocks hat, white shirt, and khaki shorts. R. 490, ll. 10 – 11. Franklin “just came up and just pushed” Griffin when they were in the club. R. 491, l. 15 –

492, l. 9. After Franklin pushed the 5'4", 130 pound Griffin, there was an argument between their party and the bouncers. R. 493, ll. 5 – 19.

Petitioner's group ended up in the hallway where petitioner Bethel was already talking to the owner. R. 495, l. 22 – 496, l. 17. Bethel was trying to calm everything down. R. 496, ll. 13 – 19. Franklin was "out of control" and acted "like he had some type of grudge on his shoulder." R. 496, ll. 20 – 25. Franklin threatened them. R. 497, ll. 1 – 5. Once outside, Griffin said the pepper spray was all around the ramp area. R. 497, ll. 11 – 23. Bethel was only a couple of feet away from Griffin when he was pepper sprayed. R. 500, ll. 8 – 16. Griffin could not see. R. 500, ll. 17 – 25. The pepper spray was "all in the air." R. 501, ll. 15 – 22. When Griffin got to the bottom of the ramp, he heard gunshots. R. 501, ll. 4 – 14. R. 502, ll. 7 – 10.

Curtis Long ("Long") testified for the defense. Long was in the lobby with Bethel talking with the club managers when the other members of their party were forced into the lobby by the bouncers. R. 533, l. 5 – 534, l. 22. Bethel was trying to figure out why they were being ejected from the club. R. 535, ll. 12 – 16. Halfway down the ramp outside the club, Long was pepper sprayed. R. 535, l. 17 – 25. He could not see and he could not breathe. R. 536, ll. 15 – 19. He heard several gunshots. R. 536, l. 20 – 537, l. 1. Long believed that everyone in their party suffered the effects of the pepper spray. R. 547, ll. 8 – 9.

Bethel testified. Bethel first noticed Franklin when Franklin approached his cousins Ernest Bethel and Griffin and told him to calm down. R. 563, ll. 1 – 8. Franklin followed them around the club. R. 564, ll. 1 – 5.

Bethel was not armed when he first entered Mr. Lucky's. R. 564, ll. 8 – 9. At some point during the evening, he went to the bathroom and discovered Long had his gun. R. 564, ll. 10 – 15.

Bethel did not know why Long had his gun. R. 564, ll. 22 – 24. He took the gun from Long. R. 564, ll. 13 – 15. R. 565, ll. 15 – 18.

Bethel heard that the bouncers were plotting a robbery from one of the dancers. R. 569, l. 23 – 570, l. 5. He told Long he was ready to go because he thought he “was going to get robbed.” R. 571, l. 25 – 572, l. 6. Long and Bethel were talking to the manager. R. 572, ll. 7 – 14. The bouncers began forcing Griffin and Ernest Bethel from the club. R. 573, ll. 20 – 24. Franklin was threatening their entire party. R. 573, ll. 8 – 14. Bethel was trying to calm everyone down. R. 574, ll. 10 – 13.

Bethel was walking down the ramp when other security guards came up the ramp from the parking lot and stopped him. R. 575, ll. 20 – 25. He saw Franklin and another bouncer jump over a rail. R. 658, ll. 13 – 21. There was “a whole bunch of like cursing and threats.” R. 660, ll. 1 – 2. The bouncers were preparing to fight and Bethel’s party was pepper sprayed. R. 660, ll. 11 – 25. Bethel was pepper sprayed. R. 581, ll. 6 – 7.

Bethel testified about what happened next:

A. I tried to rub my eyes and that’s when – I guess it was on my hands and it got worse, and I kind of like, you know, panicked. I couldn’t see, and that’s when I grabbed my gun out of my back pocket.

Q. Why did you grab your gun?

A. I was scared. I couldn’t see anything. I heard my cousin and them yelling, and I didn’t know what was going on.

Q. Okay. What did you do with your gun once you grabbed it?

A. I just kept it in my hand. I kept it in my hand, and I was like trying to regain my eyesight.

Q. Okay. What happened – what happened while you were doing that? Were you making your way down the ramp?

A. Yeah, I was going towards my cousin and them voices, all the yelling and stuff. I was walking towards the voices. In the scene is I – I don't know where exactly I was, but I heard a gunshot, and like it scared me. It caught me off guard, and as soon as I heard that, that's when I tensed up and I shot the gun.

**Q. Okay. Did you intend on shooting the gun?**

**A. No, I didn't. It caught me off guard. I heard – I couldn't see, and then I heard the gunshot and my body tensed up. I got – I jumped.**

Q. Where did you have the gun at?

A. I had it – I had it on my side.

Q. You had it on your side?

A. Yes.

...

Q. Where was your gun at whenever you heard a gunshot?

A. On my side.

Q. What happened after that?

A. I jumped like trying to block my face, and when I did that, the gun went off and I was running from the gunshots. I didn't know where I was running to. I was just running away from the gunshots.

Q. Okay. How many times did your gun fire at that point?

A. Once.

Q. Okay. And while you are one of running away from the gunshot, what happened to you?

A. I got shot.

R. 581, l. 9 – 583, l. 21 (emphasis added). During cross-examination, Bethel said, "I didn't intend to shoot nobody. I didn't try to shoot nobody. I was – I couldn't see. I just got maced, and I heard a gunshot and I flinched." R. 624, ll. 17 – 23. When asked on redirect if he meant to pull the trigger, Bethel replied, "No, I didn't. It was like a reflex, like I got scared and my body tensed up. I

had my hand on the trigger. I like – when I jumped, it call me off guard. I couldn't see. I didn't know – I thought I was getting shot at.” R. 637, ll. 21 – 25.

Bethel dropped his gun when he fell after being shot by Hope. R. 584, ll. 2 – 16. Hope was still shooting at Bethel. R. 584, ll. 10 – 16. He did not shoot back at Hope. R. 584, ll. 17 – 19. Hope trapped Bethel and told him to take his pants off. R. 315, ll. 5 – 8. Bethel was able to scramble over a fence and escape. R. 586, ll. 6 – 587, l. 9.

#### The Video

An edited version of the surveillance video was admitted into evidence as State's Exhibit 71. R. 34, l. 3 – 35, l. 10. The edited video shows the time of day. (State's Exhibit 71). For the Court's convenience, petitioner will also refer to the time elapsed when the video is played.

The video depicts the following. Bethel enters the lobby of Mr. Lucky's. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:32:33; 18:19). Long is already in the lobby talking to Fred Simpkins. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:32:33; 18:19). The two men are calm. Approximately two minutes later, Ernest Bethel (wearing a yellow shirt) enters the lobby, followed by Griffin (wearing a white shirt). (State's Exhibit 71, 3:34:27; 20:13). Two girls then enter the lobby. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:34:39; 20:25). Franklin enters the lobby six seconds later, headed straight for Griffin, and the two begin arguing. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:34:46; 20:31). More people then enter the lobby from the club and Bethel gets between Franklin and Griffin. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:34:51; 20:37). Ernest Bethel and Franklin begin arguing and Ernest Bethel leaves with Franklin right behind him. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:00). More people follow Franklin out of the door. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:16; 21:01).

At this point in the video, the view switches from the lobby to the balcony. Bethel enters the frame along with Ernest Bethel. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:04; 21:12). Franklin appears then exits to

the right of the screen. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:06; 21:14). Bethel walks down the ramp and exits the frame. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:16; 21:24).

The video again switches camera angles to the parking lot. No one is in the frame. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:45; 21:38)). Franklin enters the frame, walks into the parking lot and turns around. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:48; 21:41). Ernest Bethel enters and begins arguing with Franklin. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:57; 21:50). Petitioner enters the frame slightly behind Franklin and disappears behind Franklin. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:35:59; 21:51). There is a muzzle flash in the vicinity of Franklin. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:36:01; 21:51). It then appears that there are several muzzle flashes by Hope's side as he is drawing his gun. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:36:03; 21:56). Muzzle flashes can be seen in the back of the parking lot near a fence. (State's Exhibit 71, 3:36:11; 22:04). Neither the resolution nor the zoom on the video is sufficient to contradict petitioner's testimony.

#### *The Charge Conference*

Following the conclusion of testimony, the trial judge told the attorneys what she intended to charge the jury. When discussing self-defense, Judge Jefferson noted that Bethel testified "that his act was unintentional, that he had mace in his eyes. He was trying to get his bearings. He was jittery basically **and inadvertently pulled the trigger of the gun.**" R. 655, ll. 10 – 14 (emphasis added). After further discussion, Judge Jefferson asked defense counsel which lesser included offenses he was requesting. R. 664, ll. 9 – 11. Defense counsel responded, "Certainly involuntary, Your Honor. I think that there might be some evidence – involuntary under State v. White.<sup>1</sup> Your Honor, I believe that –" R. 664, ll. 12 – 14. The trial judge interrupted:

There is no evidence that he was involved with handling a weapon and accidentally discharged it. Involuntary manslaughter is negligence basically and you

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<sup>1</sup> Defense counsel was likely referring to State v. Light, 378 S.C. 641, 664 S.E.2d 465 (2008).

kill somebody, but you have to be acting lawfully basically. I just don't think there's any testimony to support an involuntary manslaughter in this case.

R. 664, ll. 15 – 20. Defense counsel attempted to further argue for involuntary manslaughter, stating that being lawfully armed in self-defense and negligently handling a weapon would constitute involuntary manslaughter. R. 665, l. 25 – 666, l. 3. The trial judge then stated that being lawfully armed in self-defense equated to having a license or a concealed weapons permit. R. 666, ll. 4 – 20. The trial judge then said, “But involuntary manslaughter is really about circumstances where there's negligence **and there is an utter lack of malice or a failure of proof of malice**, and this case is not – certainly does not factually support it.” R. 666, l. 23 – 667, l. 1 (emphasis added). Court soon thereafter adjourned for the evening.

The next morning, Judge Jefferson began by reiterating her rulings. She stated that she would not instruct involuntary manslaughter because it was not supported by the facts. R. 673, ll. 15 – 23. Judge Jefferson ruled:

In order to establish involuntary manslaughter, it would have to be established that the defendant unintentionally killed the victim without malice but while engaged in an unlawful activity not naturally tending to cause death or great bodily harm. **Clearly the evidence in the record is that malice did exist.** There is evidence that he was engaged in an unlawful activity. However, there is no evidence that that unlawful activity would not naturally tend the cause death or great bodily injury or that the defendant unintentionally killed the victim without malice while engaged in a lawful activity with reckless disregard for the safety of others.

There is his testimony that he unintentionally killed the victim. **However, there is evidence of malice** and there is evidence that there is – there is evidence that he was engaged in an unlawful activity, that being the possession of an unlicensed handgun in the parking lot of a – of an establishment.

R. 673, l. 24 – 674, l. 16 (emphasis added). Petitioner renewed his objection to the failure to charge involuntary manslaughter at the conclusion of the charge. R. 785, ll. 12 – 17. The Court of Appeals affirmed in a summary unpublished opinion without oral argument. App. 2.

## Discussion

Some evidence of malice does not negate a defendant's right to a lesser-included offense. If this were the case, almost no defendant tried for murder would be entitled to either a voluntary or involuntary manslaughter charge. The trial judge erred in ruling that because some evidence of malice existed, Bethel could not receive an involuntary manslaughter charge. The Court of Appeals erred in ratifying this error.

The trial court erred in looking at the evidence that supported the murder charge and ignoring the legal principle that if any evidence exists to support a lesser-included offense, it must be given so that the jury, not the judge, decides factual issues. The law to be charged is determined from the evidence presented at trial. State v. Knoten, 347 S.C. 296, 302, 555 S.E.2d 391, 394 (2001). Reversible error is committed if the trial court fails to give a requested charge on an issue raised by the evidence. State v. Hill, 315 S.C. 260, 262, 433 S.E.2d 848, 849 (1993). Moreover, when determining whether the evidence requires a charge on a lesser included offense, the court views the facts in the light most favorable to the defendant. See Knoten, 347 S.C. at 302, 555 S.E.2d at 394 (requiring the trial court to view facts in the light most favorable to a defendant when determining whether to charge involuntary manslaughter). The trial court and the Court of Appeals failed to follow these principles when analyzing the evidence supporting an involuntary manslaughter instruction in this case.

“Involuntary manslaughter is a lesser-included offense of murder, and is defined as the unintentional killing of another without malice while engaged in either (1) the commission of some unlawful act not amounting to a felony and not naturally tending to cause death or great bodily harm, or (2) the doing of a lawful act with a reckless disregard for the safety of others.” State v. Scott, 414 S.C. 482, 487, 779 S.E.2d 529, 531 (2015) (internal quotations omitted). Here, the

evidence supported a charge under the second definition of involuntary manslaughter. Bethel lawfully armed himself in self-defense, but acted recklessly and unintentionally in his handling of the gun. Contradicting itself, the trial court necessarily found evidence in the record that Bethel was entitled to arm himself because it charged self-defense. R. 777, l. 3 – 781, l. 6.

Bethel overheard the Black Ops Security bouncers were plotting a robbery. R. 569, l. 23 – 570, l. 5. Bethel was leaving when they were pepper sprayed. R. 575, ll. 20 – 25. R. 581, ll. 6 – 7. He heard threats. R. 660, ll. 1 – 2. This evidence supports the first prong of involuntary manslaughter—that Bethel lawfully armed himself in self-defense. Bethel’s testimony that the gun fired only after he was pepper sprayed, could not see, and he “jumped” after hearing a gunshot satisfies the definition of acting with reckless disregard for the safety of others. R. 581, l. 9 – 583, l. 21. Bethel unequivocally testified that he did not intentionally fire the gun.

A defendant’s testimony that a gun fired unintentionally supports a charge of involuntary manslaughter. State v. Light, 378 S.C. 641, 648-49, 664 S.E.2d 465, 468-69 (2008); State v. Sams, 410 S.C. 303, 314, 764 S.E.2d 511, 516-17 (2014); State v. Battle, 408 S.C. 109, 119-121, 757 S.E.2d 737, 742-43 (Ct. App. 2014). In Light, the Court held that the defendant was entitled to an involuntary manslaughter charge because evidence existed that he “recklessly handled the gun” after lawfully arming himself in self-defense. Light at 648, 664 S.E.2d at 468-69. The Light Court also noted a difference exists between lawfully *arming* yourself in self-defense and lawfully *acting* in self-defense. Id. at n.6. In the more recent case of Sams, this Court interpreted Light as standing for the proposition that the “negligent handling of a loaded gun” supports submission of involuntary manslaughter to the jury. Sams at 314, 764 S.E.2d at 516-17.

“Importantly, our courts have long emphasized that to warrant a court’s eliminating the offense of manslaughter, it should very clearly appear that there is no evidence whatsoever

tending to reduce the crime from murder to manslaughter.” State v. Brayboy, 387 S.C. 174, 180, 691 S.E.2d 482, 486 (Ct. App. 2010); see also State v. Cole, 338 S.C. 97, 101, 525 S.E.2d 511, 513 (2000); State v. Burriss, 334 S.C. 256, 265, 513 S.E.2d 104, 109 (1999). Thus, a request to charge a lesser-included offense is properly refused only when there is no evidence that the defendant committed the lesser rather than the greater offense. Casey v. State, 305 S.C. 445, 447, 409 S.E.2d 391, 392 (1991).

Burriss is similar to the facts of this case. In Burriss, as the attacker advanced on the defendant, the defendant reached for his gun and “it went off,” killing another man who had earlier participated in the attack. Burriss at 258-59, 513 S.E.2d at 105-06. The defendant was only sixteen and could not legally possess a pistol, but had lawfully armed himself in self-defense. Id. at 259, 513 S.E.2d at 106. The Court held that since the evidence supported a finding that the defendant was lawfully armed in self-defense at the time the fatal shot occurred, that “the negligent handling of a loaded gun will support a finding of involuntary manslaughter.” Id. at 265, 513 S.E.2d at 109. Burriss eliminates Judge Jefferson’s reasoning that Bethel was not entitled to an involuntary manslaughter charge because he may have been illegally in possession of a pistol. Burriss demonstrates that a defendant can be in illegal possession of a pistol but still be lawfully armed in self-defense.

Also as in Burriss, evidence existed in the record supporting that Bethel negligently handled the loaded gun. Bethel spent a lot of money at the strip club. He was afraid after hearing of a robbery plot and watching Franklin and the other bouncers threaten him and other members of his party. He was pepper sprayed as he was trying to leave. Bethel was entitled to arm himself in self-defense and his testimony that he jumped after hearing a gunshot allows the inference of reckless handling of a weapon. The existence of evidence supporting malice is legally irrelevant to

analyzing the lesser-included offenses. If the trial court's reasoning were correct, there would never be any lesser included offenses charged in a valid murder prosecution since there must always be some evidence of malice to survive directed verdict and submit the case to the jury.

The trial court's error cannot be harmless in this case. It is apparent from defense counsel's opening statement and closing argument that the trial judge's unexpected refusal to give an involuntary manslaughter charge negated the entire defense strategy. The defense certainly anticipated an involuntary manslaughter charge based on existing law and the defendant's testimony. Defense counsel told the jury in his opening statement "that not all shootings are murders" and that the State would not have proof of malice. R. 22, ll. 15 – 19. R. 23, l. 22 – 25, l. 11.

After the trial judge's unexpected ruling, defense counsel was left to argue in favor of voluntary manslaughter. R. 719, l. 25 – 721, l. 4. Defense counsel was forced to argue against his own client's testimony in an attempt to convince the jury to convict Bethel of voluntary manslaughter instead of murder. R. 729, l. 23 – 730, l. 7. Defense counsel told the jury, "Now, I know what you're saying: He didn't say he was mad. There's circumstantial evidence that he was mad. Y'all might find that it was more likely that he was mad, but my client testified that he was not mad." R. 729, l. 23 – 730, l. 7. The closing then shifted towards an accident defense. R. 730, ll. 2 – 20. The prejudice and loss of credibility with the jury from this wholesale alteration of strategy corrupted the entire trial. Furthermore, the evidence (including the video) were not conclusive and important questions of fact existed for the jury.

The Court of Appeals did not apply a harmless error analysis, indicating it believed the trial judge's ruling was correct. App. 2. The parentheticals included in the court's opinion indicate that perhaps the court believed petitioner was not lawfully armed in self-defense.

Specifically, the Court cited Burriss for the proposition that, “A person can be acting lawfully, even if he is in unlawful possession of a weapon, if he was entitled to arm himself in self-defense at the time of the shooting.” App. 2, citing Burriss at 262, 513 S.E.2d at 108. The court then cited State v. Gibson, 390 S.C. 347, 357, 701 S.E.2d 766, 771 (Ct. App. 2010) for the proposition, “[F]or the purposes of involuntary manslaughter, the inquiries associated with whether or not to instruct on the defense of self-defense are not applicable.” App. 2. Neither of these cases support a conclusion that petitioner was not lawfully armed in self-defense.

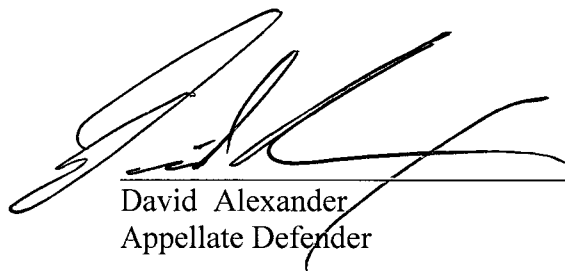
As discussed above, Burriss fully supports petitioner’s argument that he was entitled to an involuntary manslaughter charge. In Gibson, the defendant was charged under the hand of one, hand of all theory for his brother’s actions in firing a gun during a similar melee that spilled into the parking lot of a bar. Gibson at 351-54, 390 S.E.2d at 768-69. The defendant did not fire the fatal shot. Id. at 354, 701 S.E.2d at 770. The defendant’s brother, Jacques, said he fired his gun into the air. Id. at 353, 701 S.E.2d at 769. The Gibson court discussed the State’s argument that Jacques was not lawfully armed in self-defense, but ultimately **made no conclusion on this point.** Id. at 356-57, 701 S.E.2d at 771. Instead, the court affirmed the denial of an involuntary manslaughter charge because Jacques had “voluntarily and intentionally fired his weapon.” Id. at 359, 701 S.E.2d at 772.

Here, unlike Gibson, petitioner testified **he fired unintentionally**—flinching after he heard a gunshot. Gibson reached no conclusion that the defendant was not lawfully armed in self-defense and cannot serve as controlling precedent in this case where petitioner was afraid of being robbed, was threatened, and was pepper-sprayed. Just like Burriss, Gibson supports petitioner’s argument that he was entitled to an involuntary manslaughter charge.

The facts of this case entitled petitioner to an instruction on involuntary manslaughter under the longstanding precedent of this Court. Nothing in either the Court of Appeals' reasoning or the trial court's ruling negates the fact that petitioner's own testimony satisfied the "any evidence" standard required to receive this charge. The trial court's reasoning that some evidence supporting the greater charge negates all possibility of giving the lesser charge is manifestly incorrect. The evidence in this case created a jury question on involuntary manslaughter and the trial court's unexpected refusal to submit the charge to the jury upended petitioner's trial strategy. This Court should reverse.

**CONCLUSION**

For the foregoing reasons, this Court should grant certiorari and reverse petitioner's convictions.



David Alexander  
Appellate Defender

ATTORNEY FOR PETITIONER

This 15th day of December, 2017.

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

IN THE SUPREME COURT

Appeal from Richland County

Honorable Deadra L. Jefferson, Circuit Court Judge

THE STATE,

RESPONDENT,

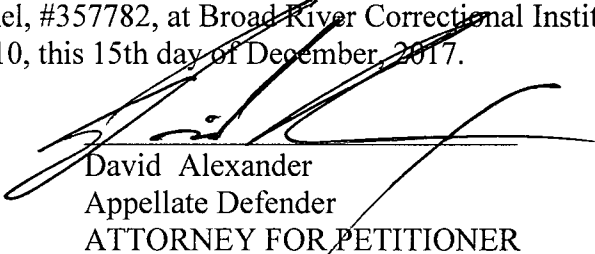
V.

JAMES KEVIN BETHEL,

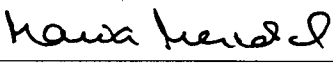
APPELLANT

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

The undersigned hereby certifies that a true copy of the Brief of Petitioner in the above referenced case has been served upon Alphonso Simon, Esquire, at the Rembert Dennis Building, 1000 Assembly Street, Room 519, Columbia, SC 29201; and a copy of the Brief of Petitioner has been served on James K. Bethel, #357782, at Broad River Correctional Institution, 4460 Broad River Road, Columbia, SC 29210, this 15th day of December, 2017.

  
David Alexander  
Appellate Defender  
ATTORNEY FOR PETITIONER

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me  
this 15th day of December, 2017.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Notary Public for South Carolina  
My Commission Expires: July 3, 2023