

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In The Court of Appeals

ORIGINAL

APPEAL FROM GEORGETOWN COUNTY
Court of General Sessions

Edward B. Cottingham, Circuit Court Judge

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SC Court of Appeals

Case No. 2012-GS-22-560, 561, 587, 588
Appellate Case No. 2012-213368

The State,

Respondent,

v.

Michael Lee Cardwell,

Appellant.

FINAL BRIEF OF APPELLANT

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STATEMENT OF ISSUE ON APPEAL

DID THE TRIAL COURT ERR IN DENYING THE MOTION TO SUPPRESS EVIDENCE OF THE VIDEOTAPE ON APPELLANT'S WIFE'S LAPTOP WHEN THE LAPTOP WAS GIVEN TO A COMPUTER TECHNICIAN TO REPAIR, WHERE LAW ENFORCEMENT HAPPENED TO BE AT THE TECHNICIAN'S HOUSE AND SAW A QUESTIONABLE IMAGE FLASH ACROSS THE LAPTOP COMPUTER, WHERE LAW ENFORCEMENT THEN DIRECTED THE TECHNICIAN TO PLAY THE VIDEO IN ITS ENTIRETY WITHOUT OBTAINING A SEARCH WARRANT, AND WHERE LAW ENFORCEMENT INSTRUCTED THE TECHNICIAN TO COPY THE VIDEO AND DELIVER TO ANOTHER OFFICER WHO ALSO WATCHED THE VIDEO WITHOUT A SEARCH WARRANT?

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On August 22, 2012, the Georgetown grand jury indicted Michael Cardwell on two counts of unlawful conduct towards a child and two counts of sexual exploitation of a minor, first degree. The case proceeded to trial in front of the Honorable Edward B. Cottingham on October 29, 2012. (R. p. 1). Eric Fox represented Mr. Cardwell and Candice Lively represented the State. (R. p. 2). On October 31, 2012, the jury returned a verdict finding Mr. Cardwell guilty on all counts. (R. p. 200, l. 3—R. p. 201, l. 3). The court sentenced Mr. Cardwell to concurrent two-year sentences for the unlawful conduct toward a minor charges, and concurrent three-year sentences for the sexual exploitation of a minor charges. (R. p. 213, l. 11 – R. p. 214, l. 4). The court stated its purpose was for Mr. Cardwell to serve a total of five years. (R. p. 214, ll. 4-5). Additionally, Mr. Cardwell was required to register as a sexual offender. (R. p. 214, ll. 7-12).

FACTS

Mr. Cardwell met Sarah Cardwell, who was then Sarah Young, at the end of 1988 or 1989 when he was a volunteer firefighter. (R. p. 119, ll. 9-14). They began dating in October 2006. (R. p. 122, ll. 4-5). At the time, she had three children from a prior relationship, Minor Child 1, Minor Child 2, and a newborn. (R. p. 122, ll. 6-10). Mr. Cardwell also had two children from a prior marriage (R. p. 122, ll. 11-16). Mr. Cardwell and Mrs. Cardwell moved in

together in 2006 and had a child together. (R. p. 123, ll. 21-25). They later married. (R. p. 117, l. 6).

On an evening in 2007, when Minor Child 1 was seven years old and his sister, Minor Child 2 was six years old, the two children took a bath and ran into the living room naked. (R. p. 113, l. 3, R. p. 126, ll. 7-13, R. p. 127, l. 2). Mr. Cardwell had just gotten home from work and had put on gym shorts. (R. p. 127, l. 2). As the children came out of the bathroom, they ran up to Mr. Cardwell and pulled his shorts down. (R. p. 127, ll. 16-18). Mrs. Cardwell pulled out a video camera and began filming the children and Mr. Cardwell. (R. p. 126, ll. 21-24).

Years later, in November of 2010, Mrs. Cardwell was having problems starting her laptop computer, so she dropped it off with computer technician, David Marsh to be repaired. (R. 47, ll. 6-10). The following month, Chief of Police for the City of Johnsonville, Ron Douglas, went over to David Marsh's business to drop off packages. (R. p. 73, ll. 22-25). When Mr. Marsh left the room to take the packages to the garage, Chief Douglas called Mr. Marsh back wanting to see an image that had just flashed across the screen of Mrs. Cardwell's laptop. (R. p. 49, l. 25—R. p. 50, l. 2). Chief Douglas asked Mr. Marsh about the image and Mr. Marsh explained that the computer was not his. (R. p. 74, ll. 21-25). Chief Douglas came into Mr. Marsh's house which also functioned as his office and asked him to "[p]lease back that up just a little bit." (R. p. 54, l. 10). At the time, Mr. Marsh was backing up information that was being downloaded from Mrs. Cardwell's computer. (R. p. 54, ll. 13-16). As he was backing up the files, he and Chief Douglas saw a still image on the screen of Minor Child 1, a male boy, in a pink bra with nothing else on. (R. p. 54, l. 19—R. p. 55, l. 1). At the top of the image was a play button, and Chief Douglas asked Mr. Marsh to play the video for him. (R. p. 55, ll. 4-9). Mr. Marsh and Chief Douglas viewed a minute of the video and saw Minor Child 1, Minor Child 2, and Mr. Cardwell

in the video. (R. p. 55, ll. 24-25). Chief Douglas later called Mr. Marsh and asked him to make a copy of the video onto a DVD. (R. p. 66, ll. 9-11). Chief Douglas did not have jurisdiction over Georgetown County, so he contacted the Georgetown Sheriff's Office to assist him. (R. p. 75, ll. 22-24, R. p. 80, ll. 16-22). Detective Phillip Hanna of the Georgetown Sheriff's Office was told that there were images of nude children on a computer that was being worked on by Mr. Marsh and they wanted him "to follow up on it to see if they – if it was, in fact, any kind of illegal pictures or videos." (R. p. 81, ll. 4-5). Chief Douglas told Mr. Marsh to copy the video onto a DVD and bring it with the laptop computer to the police department (R. p. 66, ll. 9-16). Upon Chief Douglas's request, Mr. Marsh brought the computer and the DVD over to Detective Hanna who took possession of the items on December 10, 2010. (R. p. 62, ll. 20-21, R. p. 68, ll. 11-15, R. p. 80, l. 22, R. p. 83, ll. 9-10). Detective Hanna viewed the video and contacted the Department of Social Services (DSS). (R. p. 85, l. 1, R. p. 86, ll. 6-7).¹

Prior to trial, counsel for Mrs. Cardwell and Mr. Cardwell moved to suppress the video evidence due to an illegal search and seizure of the laptop computer by Chief Douglas. (R. p. 21, l. 3 – R. p. 23, l. 2). Counsel also argued a motion to suppress due to Detective Hannah's viewing the video and seizing the laptop without a search warrant. (R. p. 27, ll. 20-23). Counsel argued that Mrs. Cardwell had an expectation of privacy in her laptop computer as she had numerous personal pictures on it of her family and did not relinquish her expectation of privacy by asking Mr. Marsh to repair her laptop. (R. p. 21, l. 3—R. p. 25, l. 9). The trial court denied the motion, stating that Mrs. Cardwell had no expectation of privacy when she voluntarily gave the laptop over to Mr. Marsh, the computer was in plain view when Chief Douglas viewed the

¹ The record indicates that Detective Hanna received a search warrant to search the contents of the laptop computer. (R. p. 83, ll. 17-18). The record does not indicate that the same search warrant applied to the DVD handed to Detective Hanna by Mr. Marsh.

image, and there was no search and seizure because at the time the property was in the public domain. (R. p. 21, l. 16 – R. p. 28, l. 4). Defense counsel renewed the motion during trial, asking the trial court once again to suppress the video and anything that was on the computer due to the illegal searches and seizures by Chief Douglas and Detective Hannah. (R. p. 51, l. 19 – R. p. 52, l. 10, R. p. 74, ll. 9-11).² The trial court denied the motion again (R. p. 52, ll. 11-12, R. p. 74, ll. 12-13).

At the end of trial, Michael Cardwell was found guilty of all charges against him (R. p. 200, l. 14 – R. p. 201, l. 3). Defense counsel unsuccessfully moved for a new trial. (R. p. 207, l. 16 – R. p. 208, l. 4). This appeal followed.

ARGUMENT

The trial court erred in denying Mr. Cardwell's motion to suppress the video evidence because Mr. Cardwell had a reasonable expectation of privacy in the laptop computer and its contents and the plain view doctrine is not applicable.

Pursuant to the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution, "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." U.S. Const. amend IV. Accordingly, the Fourth Amendment protects citizens from unreasonable searches and seizures and requires evidence which is seized in violation of this protection to be excluded or suppressed at trial. State v. Gamble, 405 S.C. 409, 416, 747 S.E.2d 784, 788 (2013). "The Fourth Amendment does not bar a search and

² Counsel for Mr. Cardwell joined in on the motion to suppress the video and the use of the laptop computer for illegal searches by Chief Douglas and Detective Hannah during Mr. Marsh's testimony at trial. The trial judge stated that he accepted any motion made generally as being made by both counsel (R. p. 52, ll. 16-21).

seizure, even an arbitrary one, effected by a private party on his own initiative. It does, however, bar evidence arising from such intrusions if the private party acted as an instrument or agent of the government.” State v. Brockman, 339 S.C. 57, 66, 528 S.E.2d 661, 666 (2000) (internal citation omitted).³ “[T]he United States Supreme Court adopted the federal exclusionary rule to prevent the admission of evidence at trial that was unlawfully seized in violation of the Fourth Amendment and subsequently expanded that rule to apply to the individual states via the Due Process clause.” State v. Spears, 393 S.C. 466, 482, 713 S.E.2d 324, 332 (Ct. App. 2011)

“A search compromises the individual interest in privacy; a seizure deprives the individual of dominion over his or her person or property.” State v. Brown, 401 S.C. 82, 88, 736 S.E.2d 263, 266 (2012). Generally, searches and seizures performed without a warrant are unreasonable unless one of the following exceptions exist: (1) search incident to a lawful arrest, (2) hot pursuit, (3) stop and frisk, (4) automobile exception, (5) the plain view doctrine, (6) consent, and (7) abandonment. Id. at 89, 736 S.E.2d at 266. In this case, the trial court’s decision was clear error as Mr. Cardwell had a reasonable interest of privacy in the laptop and the video evidence did not fall within the plain view doctrine. See Narciso v. State, 397 S.C. 24, 32, 723 S.E.2d 369, 373 (2012) (“This Court will only reverse the circuit court’s decision on a motion to suppress when there is clear error.”). Accordingly, the trial court erred by not granting the motion to suppress and, as a result, Mr. Cardwell’s conviction should be reversed.

³ Although the laptop was physically searched by Mr. Marsh, it was done so at the request of Chief Douglas, who, upon seeing a questionable image across the laptop while Mr. Marsh was out of the room, told Mr. Marsh, “I just saw something go across the screen, can you back it up.” (R. p. 54, ll. 1-3). Once Mr. Marsh found the file Chief Douglas requested, Chief Douglas asked Mr. Marsh to play the video for him. (R. p. 55, ll. 4-11). Therefore, this was not a private search as it was performed at the direction of law enforcement.

I. The trial court erred in denying the motion to suppress all video evidence because Mr. Cardwell had a reasonable expectation of privacy in the laptop computer.

First, Mr. Cardwell had a legitimate expectation of privacy in the laptop computer that was illegally searched and seized by Chief Douglas and Detective Hannah. “When a criminal defendant moves to suppress evidence on Fourth Amendment grounds, the trial court must first determine whether the defendant has a legitimate expectation of privacy in the searched premises.” State v. Bruce, 402 S.C. 621, 624, 741 S.E.2d 590, 592 (Ct. App. 2013). “A legitimate expectation of privacy is both subjective and objective in nature: the defendant must show (1) he had a subjective expectation of not being discovered, and (2) the expectation is one that society recognizes as reasonable.” State v. Robinson, 396 S.C. 577, 583-84, 722 S.E.2d 820, 823 (Ct. App. 2012). “A reasonable expectation of privacy exists in property being searched when the defendant has a relationship with the property or property owner.” Id. at 584, 722 S.E.2d at 823. Additionally, it has been held that a person contesting the legality of a search due to lack of a search warrant only has to show that the state is attempting to introduce evidence against him. See State v. McKnight, 291 S.C. 110, 115, 352 S.E.2d 471, 474 (1987). Here, Mr. Cardwell has standing to contest the legality of the search of the laptop because, at the time the video was filmed, he had been dating Mrs. Cardwell and living with her since 2006, and they had a child together. (R. p. 109, l. 15—R. p. 110, l. 3, R. p. 122, l. 3—R. p. 123, l. 25). Additionally, the video was evidence that was being introduced against Mr. Cardwell at trial. See id. (“[O]ne contesting the legality of a search because of a defect under Section 17-13-140 need only show that the State is attempting to introduce the evidence against him.”).

Although this precise issue has not been addressed by South Carolina, other states have recognized an expectation of privacy in an electronic repository for personal data. See State v.

Ballard, 276 P.3d 976 (N.M. Ct. App. 2012) (stating “society will recognize an individual's expectation of privacy in a person's personal computer and external hard drives . . . [.]” but finding defendant relinquished privacy interest by specifically asking technician to destroy child pornography stored on his hard drives); United States v. Barth, 26 F. Supp. 2d 929 (W.D. Tex 1998) (finding “that the Fourth Amendment protection of closed computer files and hard drives is similar to the protection it affords a person's closed containers and closed personal effects.”); United States v. Chan, 830 F. Supp. 531, 534-35 (N. D. Cal. 1993) (finding the defendant's expectation of privacy in a seized pager was analogous to the privacy right a person has in a closed container but still denying the motion to suppress because it was a valid search incident to arrest).

The facts of United States v. Barth are strikingly similar to the facts at issue in the case at hand. In Barth, the defendant was having difficulty with his computer so he sent it to a self-employed computer technician. Barth, 26 F. Supp. 2d at 932. As the technician was opening individual files in search of viruses, he observed a JPEG image which appeared to be child pornography. Id. The technician was also a confidential informant, and he immediately notified the FBI. Id. The FBI agent told the technician to copy the files on the hard drive onto disks. Id. at 932-33. The technician then took the hard drives to the local police department and informed the police that he had made a copy of the hard drive pursuant to the FBI agent's instructions. Id. at 933. The officers obtained a search warrant to look at the hard drive based on the information obtained by the technician, rather than what they had observed. Id.

The district court in Barth found that while “the protection afforded to a person's computer files and hard drive is not well-defined . . . the Fourth Amendment protection of closed computer files and hard drives is similar to the protection it affords a person's closed containers

and closed personal effects.” Id. at 936. The court stated that a warrant is generally required to search the contents of a closed container, outside of automobile searches, due to the owner’s expectation of privacy in the contents of the container rather than the container itself. Id. Therefore, “by placing data in files in a storage device such as his hard drive, the Court [found] that Defendant manifested a reasonable expectation of privacy in the contents of those files. These files should therefore be afforded the full protection of the warrant requirement.” Id. at 936-37. The district court further explained that the defendant did not relinquish his reasonable expectation of privacy in his closed, individual files when he handed the hard drive over to a computer technician. Id. at 937. The district court compared this to a tenant who does not lose his expectation of privacy just because the landlord possesses the key and maintains a limited right to enter the premises for inspection and repair. Id. (citing United States v. Osunegbu, 822 F.2d 472, 478 (5th Cir.1987)).

Likewise, in this case, Mr. Cardwell did not lose his privacy interest in his wife’s laptop when she handed it over to Mr. Marsh for the limited purpose of being repaired. Instead, the computer and the pictures and images on the computer were comparable to a closed container as in Barth. The Cardwells used the laptop to store pictures from Christmas and birthday celebrations once the memory card in their digital camera was full. (R. p. 115, ll. 5-7). By placing these photos onto the laptop hard drive storage, like the plaintiff in Barth, Mr. Cardwell and his wife manifested a reasonable expectation of privacy in the contents of those files. Accordingly, the contents of the laptop computer should be afforded the full protection of the warrant requirement. See id. at 936-37.

II. The trial court erred in denying the motion to suppress the video evidence because the plain view doctrine does not apply and a warrant was required prior to Chief Douglas and Detective Hanna viewing the video.

Chief Douglas's insistence that Mr. Marsh play the video without first obtaining a warrant was in violation of the Fourth Amendment and does not fall under the plain view exception to warrantless searches. Detective Hanna's subsequent viewing of the illegally seized video was also in violation of the Fourth Amendment as no exception to the warrant requirement is applicable. Under the plain view doctrine, objects which are in the "plain view" of a law enforcement officer who is rightfully in a position to view the objects may be seized without a warrant. State v. Wright, 391 S.C. 436, 443, 706 S.E.2d 324, 327 (2011). "[T]he two elements needed to satisfy the plain view exception are: (1) the initial intrusion which afforded the authorities the plain view was lawful and (2) the incriminating nature of the evidence was immediately apparent to the seizing authorities." Id. The incriminating nature of the evidence was not immediately apparent to Chief Douglas or Detective Hannah. Both had the duty to obtain a search warrant before viewing the video. Their failure to do so violates the Fourth Amendment, and, therefore, Mr. Cardwell's conviction should be reversed.

In Walter v. United States, 447 U.S. 649 (1980), the Supreme Court stated that FBI agents were required to obtain a search warrant before they may screen obscene films that had been delivered to the wrong recipients. In Walter, twelve large, securely sealed packages of film depicting obscene activity were mistakenly delivered to the wrong recipient. Walter, 447 U.S. at 651. Employees of the mistaken recipient opened the box and unsuccessfully attempted to view the film by holding it up to the light. Id. at 652. The employees called the FBI who picked up the packages and, without obtaining a warrant, viewed the films with a projector. Id. The Supreme Court found the following:

Even though the cases before us involve no invasion of the privacy of the home, and notwithstanding that the nature of the contents of these films was indicated by descriptive material on their individual containers, we are nevertheless persuaded that the unauthorized exhibition of the films constituted an unreasonable invasion of their owner's constitutionally protected interest in privacy. It was a search; there was no warrant; the owner had not consented; and there were no exigent circumstances.

Id. at 654. The Court also found that the fact that a private party had already opened the boxes before they were acquired by the FBI did not excuse the failure to obtain a search warrant.

Id. at 655.

In this case, like in Walter, the incriminating nature of the computer file was not immediately apparent when Chief Douglas saw the image of Minor Child 1 flash across the laptop at Mr. Marsh's residence. Chief Douglas asked Mr. Marsh to manipulate the slideshow back to the image he saw go across the screen of the laptop when Mr. Marsh left the room. (R. p. 54, ll. 1-3). Upon seeing the image, Chief Douglas could have—and *should have*—obtained a search warrant before clicking the play button at the top of the image, but instead he directed Mr. Marsh to play the video (R. p. 55, ll. 8-11). Similar to the facts of Walter, the image Chief Douglas saw, while questionable, was not the video in its entirety. Instead, the image was a means of locating the video, or, like in Walter, similar to a label or description of the explicit video. Additionally, just as Chief Douglas had the duty to obtain a search warrant before asking Marsh to play the video, Detective Hanna, who only was told what was on the video and knew no search warrant had been issued, also had a duty to obtain a search warrant prior to watching the video. Their failure to do so was in violation of the Fourth Amendment, and as a result, the trial court should have applied the exclusionary rule to suppress the video evidence.

Moreover, the plain view doctrine does not excuse the warrantless search because that doctrine applies only to the *seizure* of evidence by law enforcement, not a *search* for evidence.

See State v. Abdullah, 357 S.C. 344, 352, 492, S.E.2d 344, 349 (Ct. App. 2004) (“Under the plain view doctrine, any object falling within the plain view of a law enforcement officer who is lawfully in a position to view the object is subject to lawful seizure.”); In re Thomas B.D., 326 S.C. 614, 620, 486 S.E.2d 498, 501 (Ct. App. 1997) (finding cigarette pack was in plain view when it was seized and therefore was lawful); State v. Brown, 289 S.C. 581, 588, 347 S.E.2d 882, 886 (1986) (stating “objects falling within the plain view of a law enforcement officer who is rightfully in position to view these objects are subject to seizure and may be introduced in evidence,” and finding “[t]he plain view doctrine may not be used to extend a general exploratory search from one object to another until something incriminating at last emerges.”). Here, Chief Douglas did not seize the laptop, rather he performed a search of the video as soon as he saw the image flash across the laptop by directing Mr. Marsh to play the video for him. This type of search does not fall within the parameters of the plain view doctrine. Had Chief Douglas seized the laptop computer while waiting for a search warrant to be issued, then the plain view doctrine would be applicable. However, the facts of this case do not warrant the exception. Both Chief Douglas and Detective Hanna’s failure to obtain a search warrant before viewing the video violates the Fourth Amendment.

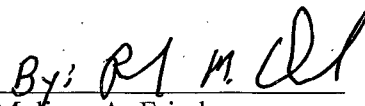
CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated, Mr. Cardwell respectfully asks this Court to reverse the trial court’s denial of the motion to suppress the video evidence, reverse Mr. Cardwell’s conviction, and remand the case for a new trial.

[Signature on Following Page]

April 15, 2014

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