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Informant has lengthy rap sheet: Felon placed in UA dormitory charged with dozens of crimes -- some violent -- over 15 years

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Mar. 22--The confidential informant who said **Charles Plinton** sold marijuana outside their dorm has run afoul of the law most of his life, including four felony convictions and a dozen misdemeanors, several involving violence.

Richard Dale Harris, 35, was a key witness at the August 2004 trial of Plinton, then a graduate student at the University of Akron. The Summit County Common Pleas jury acquitted Plinton after 40 minutes of deliberation.

Despite the verdict, a university disciplinary panel found Plinton "responsible" for "dealing drugs to a confidential informant." He was suspended for a semester, lost his campus job and was barred from student housing for life.

Plinton never returned to the university. On Dec. 12, he fatally shot himself in Pennsylvania.

Although Harris did not testify at the UA disciplinary hearing, his account of the drug purchases was summarized by a police officer. Such hearsay evidence is allowed in those hearings.

In recommending the suspension, three of the five hearing board members said they believed Harris' account, according to the hearing report.

Harris identified himself and testified in court. The Beacon Journal made several attempts to contact Harris, but could not locate him.

The Summit County Drug Unit, working with the University of Akron, placed Harris in Wallaby Hall in mid-February 2004, next door to **Charles Plinton's** room. Dubbed with the code name "Hulk," the 5-foot-4-inch Harris was given a fake schedule of classes and posed as a student while earning \$50 each time he found someone willing to sell him drugs.

Although Harris first worked as an informant in 1998, his relationship with police went back much further.

Long list of arrests

Harris testified that he had two felony convictions in 1989 in Florida, where he said he served about 18 months as a juvenile offender.

Under cross-examination, Harris, an Ohio native, said he couldn't remember details of the Florida crimes -- except that

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one was a burglary and another involved the unauthorized use of a vehicle.

"I remember the car. It was a Porsche 911," he said.

Harris' adult criminal record in the Akron area began in January 1994, when he was convicted in Akron Municipal Court of disorderly conduct by reason of intoxication, a misdemeanor, and paid \$110 in fines and costs.

Over the next decade, Harris was convicted of two felonies and a variety of misdemeanors and traffic violations.

Although he served jail time, paid hundreds of dollars in fines and court costs and spent years on probation, he avoided a state prison sentence.

In 1994, Harris was convicted of misdemeanor assault and spent three days in jail. Still later that year, he was convicted in Cuyahoga Falls Municipal Court of criminal damaging and paid \$348 in fines and court costs.

In 1997, he was back in Akron Municipal Court, where he was sentenced to 30 days in jail for misdemeanor theft and two counts of contempt of court. Later that year, his driver's license was suspended for six months after a marijuana drug abuse conviction. He also served 10 days in the county jail for contempt of court in connection with domestic violence.

Work as informant

More serious charges came in 1998, when a Summit County grand jury indicted Harris for felonious assault, robbery and forgery. If convicted of the assault charge, Harris faced up to eight years in prison.

During cross-examination at the Plinton trial, defense attorney Robert Meeker asked Harris to confirm that "you did not go to prison on those (the 1998 theft convictions) because you cooperated as an informant."

"Yes," Harris answered.

Earlier in the trial, the assistant county prosecutor asked Harris when his last criminal offense was.

" '98," Harris said.

"And since 1998, what have you been doing?" she asked.

"I stay away, what you call, from criminals because I do not like to be in trouble," Harris said.

Crimes continue

While Harris didn't have any other felony convictions, he continued to get into trouble, beginning in 1999 with a disorderly conduct conviction in Barberton Municipal Court.

In 2001, Harris pleaded guilty to violating his probation after pleading guilty in Akron Municipal Court to marijuana drug abuse. His driver's license was suspended for six months and his probation was extended a year.

In addition to his criminal record, Harris has a list of traffic violations, including five convictions between 1997 and 2001 of driving without a license or on a suspended license.

In 2003, Harris returned to work for the police -- by informing on his sister.

"My sister was getting custody of three babies, so I set her up. That way I will not have my nieces inside a drug house," Harris testified.

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Harris said his sister was charged, convicted and sent to prison.

"Did they pay you to set your sister up?" Plinton's attorney asked.

Harris said he got \$50 or \$100.

Harris said he had done 20 to 25 such deals for the police.

A few months later, Harris was installed in Wallaby Hall, sharing the two-bedroom apartment with a law student, Jerry Williams.

Harris testified that he bought marijuana from someone in the parking lot outside the dorm on March 3 and March 11.

At that point, police did not know who the seller was. Harris testified that "I took it upon myself" to identify the suspect by viewing a dorm security camera tape provided by the building manager.

Capt. Hylton Baker of the Summit County Drug Unit, which conducted the investigation with the University of Akron police, said Harris was argumentative on the stand and made a poor witness. He said Harris is no longer an informant with the drug unit.

Since the trial, Harris has been back behind bars twice.

In December 2004, he pleaded guilty to endangering children in Akron Municipal Court and served 12 days in jail.

Last year, Harris pleaded guilty to domestic violence in Barberton Municipal Court, where he was sentenced to 60 days. He served 12 days in the county jail before being transferred because of crowding to Oriana House's work release program, where he stayed 37 days.

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