

Drug conspiracy trial delayed following collapse



Support: Mindy Brass with friends Fred Barrett and his wife, Robin Fraser. Brass collapsed in court, causing her trial to be delayed.

BY PAT MURPHY
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The drug conspiracy trial of a California woman awaiting a heart transplant was disrupted when she collapsed Thursday in Oakland Circuit Court and was rushed to the hospital.

Mindy R. Brass, 40, slumped from her chair to the floor with acute respiratory distress shortly after the main prosecution witness took the stand. She was gasping for air as a friend, Fred Barrett, cradled her in his arms. Barrett administered two doses of what he said was Brass' nitroglycerin medication before sheriff's personnel arrived and rushed her to an emergency room. She was released later that day, attached to a heart monitor and confined to bed, according to Barrett.

"We (he and his wife, Robin Fraser of Farmington Hills) have been through this before," Barrett said late Thursday. "It's scary."

"Her doctor sent a letter (to the court) saying she isn't well enough to be in court for three days," said Barrett.

Judge Moyer Warshawsky, a visiting drug judge presiding over the case, declined to answer questions about the case or to discuss the reasons he imposed a gag order on defense and prosecution attorneys. "I didn't do

that lightly," he said, "because a free press is important."

But after hearing motions from the attorneys, Warshawsky said he imposed the order "in the interests of a fair trial."

The judge's clerk Friday confirmed that court had been recessed after Brass was taken to the hospital. The trial will resume Tuesday, he said, after the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., when the courts were closed anyway.

Assistant Prosecutor Beth M. Hand had previously complained that press coverage of Brass — who suffered a serious heart attack while imprisoned in 1993 — generated undue sympathy. Hand said she has sympathy for Brass' condition, but the charge against her is serious, and it could result in her being sentenced to life in prison.

After her trial in 1992 — when the jury deliberated less than two hours before returning a guilty verdict — Brass was sentenced under the state's drug-lifer law which, at the time, mandated life in prison with no chance of parole. The law has since been changed to permit parole after 15, 17 or 20 years, depending on various factors.

Brass is charged with conspiring to sell or deliver a kilo of cocaine. The charge stems from a trocy drug bust in December, 1991, when two men, William R.

■ During her incarceration at the Scott Correctional Facility in Plymouth, Brass was hospitalized on numerous occasions and evaluated for heart transplant at both the Henry Ford and the University of Michigan medical centers.

Leflet and Emil Mardenli, attempted to sell the cocaine to undercover officers at a motel.

During her incarceration at the Scott Correctional Facility in Plymouth, Brass was hospitalized on numerous occasions and evaluated for heart transplant at both the Henry Ford and the University of Michigan medical centers. She is currently on the list for heart transplant at U of M.

Last July, circuit Judge Rudy Nichols ordered a new trial for Brass because defense attorneys in 1992 did not have access to information that could be used to challenge the credibility of the main witness, William Leflet. Pending retrial, the judge released Brass to the Farmington Hills couple under house arrest.

Leflet had taken the witness stand Thursday — without the jury present — when Brass collapsed, speechless and gasping for air.

Brass, who was a highly successful marketing consultant in San Diego, admits using cocaine "recreationally," meaning in small amounts with friends and business associates. She also admits planning to sell a kilo of cocaine with Leflet and three other people.

But Brass insists she is not guilty of any crime in Michigan because she intended the drugs to be sold in California, where the penalty is less severe.

She also insists she tried to get out of the deal, but Leflet threatened and intimidated — a claim Leflet, a former bounty hunter and motorcycle gang member, denied during the original trial.

The sight of Leflet was undoubtedly stressful for Brass, Robin Fraser said Friday. "Mindy had been anxious about the trial and Leflet's testimony," Fraser said Friday. "I'm not surprised she had this attack."

Mindy could not take phone calls Friday, said Fraser, "but she expects to be back in court Tuesday."

Polish immigrants help steady sagging enrollment at seminary

BY JENNIFER PLACINTO
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The number of Catholic priesthood candidates has steadily declined over the past 30 years, but SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Orchard Lake has maintained a pretty steady enrollment thanks to the recruitment of Polish immigrants.

Approximately 8,000 students were enrolled in seminaries across the country in 1967-68. By 1998, that pool of potential priests had dropped by more than 60 percent.

"That statistic in itself is very, very disconcerting and at the same time it's cause for alarm,"

said Monsignor Frank Koper, seminary rector.

In the late 1980s, as others watched the number of American candidates fade, the Orchard Lake seminary headed for Poland to find recruits. Today, of the seminary's 52 students studying to become priests, 93 percent are from Poland and 7 percent from the U.S.

And a \$500,000 campaign to update the seminary's facilities is under way in an attempt to keep foreign enrollment up and entice more domestic candidates.

"They probably had better facilities in Poland than what we had here," said Robert Brzustewicz, a seminary board of regents member who contributed

\$100,000 toward the campaign.

The drop in American candidates is mostly due to a cultural shift — a move away from commitment, Koper said.

"Young people find it very hard to commit themselves to a cause or organization," Koper said. "It's a cultural phenomenon that young people find it difficult to make commitments."

The consequences of that are evident, he says, in the growing divorce rate in this country and in the number of couples waiting longer to get married.

"When young people find it difficult to work on their differences in marriages, they choose divorce," Koper said.

That, in turn, can lead to a

breakdown in family life, he added.

"The family is where vocations are born," Koper said.

But commitment isn't the only problem. With the growth in new technologies, he said, life is a lot more distracting nowadays.

"I think they find it difficult to listen to the call," Koper said. "And, I think with all of this, there is a certain irony that the Roman Catholic Church has been growing by 1 million people in the past 10 years," Koper said.

And there are a lot more people interested in becoming lay people in the church with the number attending seminaries increasing from 10,600 in 1985-

86 to 23,000 students nationwide in 1997-98. These people work as professionals in the church, teaching and holding administrative positions.

Polish immigrants see the opportunity to study abroad for the priesthood as a chance to live in the United States. He said all SS. Cyril and Methodius students work as priests in America, which is good because they are needed here, Koper said.

Brzustewicz's contribution, along with \$50,000 from two other regents, paid for updating the seminary's dangerously outdated wiring, with only one circuit in each seminarian's room.

The circuits would blow when students would plug in more than one appliance, such as a coffee maker and a computer.

"I was in the electrical supply business so I figured I'd try to give a hand," said Brzustewicz, a resident of Rochester.

The project ended up being more extensive than planned. All of the Orchard Lake St. Mary's campus transformers were replaced this past summer.

About half the money in the \$500,000 campaign to update the seminary has been raised, while another \$250,000 is needed.

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