

Ex-Pastor Convicted in 2nd Wife's Death

By ALEX MARQUARDT and SUZAN CLARKE | Good Morning America – Tue, Jan 22, 2013

A former pastor who is awaiting trial in the death of his first wife was convicted today of killing his second wife.

[Arthur Schirmer](#), 64, a former associate pastor at Reeders United Methodist Church in northeast Pennsylvania, blamed the death of his second wife, [Betty Schirmer](#), on a slow-speed car crash, and said his first wife fell down the stairs. But authorities ultimately charged him with killing both women.

The verdict came after prosecutors argued in court that the former pastor hit Betty Schirmer on the head with a crowbar, then loaded her into their PT Cruiser and staged a low-speed accident.

Schirmer was convicted of first-degree murder and evidence tampering. He pleaded not guilty and maintained his innocence. His attorney pledged to appeal.

In his closing argument today, Schirmer's attorney insisted that while his client cheated on Betty, 56, he had no motive to kill her.

"Accidents happen," Brandon Reish told jurors. "Sometimes there are no explanations. Car accidents, falling down stairs, falling off ladders. People die in accidents every day."

Schirmer testified Friday, denying any role in the 2008 death of his second wife. He claimed she died when he swerved their car to avoid a deer in the Poconos.

"I didn't stage an event," Arthur Schirmer said. "[Betty] began to undo her seatbelt. As she did so, a deer came out to the right. We then made it to the guardrail."

The former pastor said he was alone, lost and scared at the hospital, where he asked doctors to take his wife off life support. He told jurors that the decision "was agonizing" and that he "wanted her to live."

Betty Schirmer died a day after the crash and her body was cremated at her husband's request.

Arthur Schirmer admitted he cheated on her and lied about it. But he said the Monroe County jury should believe his account of how she died.

When investigators re-examined the crash scene in 2010, they found that the car was going less than 25 mph at the time of the crash, too slow to cause Betty Schirmer's injuries. They also found Schirmer's blood in her husband's garage, a clue that she might have been injured before she got into the car.

Arthur Schirmer explained the blood on the floor by telling the jury that she was helping him move a pile of wood from the garage when a piece fell on her, gashing her forearm.

The investigation into Betty Schirmer's death sparked another investigation into the death of Arthur Schirmer's first wife.

Schirmer faces a second trial at a later date for the death of Jewel Schirmer, who died in April 1999 in their Lebanon, Pa., home.

Arthur Schirmer testified Friday that he found Jewel Schirmer dead at the bottom of the basement staircase when he came home from a jog. She had been vacuuming dog hair from the steps, he said.

Arthur Schirmer has already pleaded not guilty in his first wife's death. He is charged with one count of criminal homicide.

Evidence from the Jewel Schirmer investigation was introduced by prosecutors in this trial, who said Schirmer beat both his wives and then covered up their deaths to make them look like accidents.

Officials decided to revisit the case of Betty Schirmer's death in 2010 after a man committed suicide inside Arthur Schirmer's church office.

The man's suicide was prompted by the discovery that his wife had been having an affair with Schirmer, police said.

Schirmer admitted on the stand that he and his second wife had not been intimate in a number of years. Schirmer said Betty Schirmer had been through menopause and wasn't interested in sex. He also admitted he viewed pornography on his home computer.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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