

Manslaughter charge dropped against Camas hunter

No sufficient evidence that middle school teacher killed bear-grass picker

By Laura McVicker

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A Skamania County judge Thursday dismissed a first-degree manslaughter charge against a Shahala Middle School teacher accused of accidentally shooting and killing a bear-grass picker in 2008.



Craig Sjoberg

Superior Court Judge E. Thompson Reynolds said there wasn't sufficient evidence that Craig A. Sjoberg, 57, of Camas fired his rifle in a reckless manner and caused the Nov. 1, 2008, death of Juan Cortez Rojas.

The Tacoma worker was picking grass in the Skookum Meadows area of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. He was shot once in the right shoulder.

While Sjoberg admitted he had fired his rifle that day — the first day of elk-hunting season — defense attorney Steven Thayer said he was prepared to bring evidence to trial that showed his client could not have fired the shot that killed Rojas.

Sjoberg had fired his rifle 750 yards and over a ridge from where Rojas' body was found.

“It became increasingly apparent over the course of our investigation that the state couldn’t prove the manslaughter charge,” Thayer said.

As part of an agreement with prosecutors, Sjoberg entered a no-contest plea in Skamania County District Court in Stevenson to a misdemeanor charge of unlawful discharge of a firearm. He was not given any jail time or fines.

Instead, District Court Judge Ron Reynier ordered Sjoberg to be placed on bench probation for two years and to speak about hunting safety at six hunter-education [classes](#). He also must reimburse the victim’s burial expenses, Thayer said.

Reynolds’ order called for the dismissal with prejudice, meaning the case cannot be refiled, because of “insufficiency of evidence and in the interest of justice.”

“This was a hunting [accident](#), not a crime,” Reynolds told the [attorneys](#).

A Skamania County chief deputy prosecutor assigned to the case, Christopher Lanz, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

On Nov. 3, 2008, Skamania County sheriff’s deputies released information to the media about the shooting and said they were seeking a person of interest. A story in The Columbian gave a physical description of a man named Craig seen “hurriedly” leaving the area at the time of the shooting.

After reading the newspaper story, Sjoberg left a message for a detective, saying he might be the person officers described. He told investigators he thought he was shooting at a three-point elk and missed.

A detective obtained a search warrant for Sjoberg’s home and found a Remington 760 rifle and .30-06 cartridges.

A firearms expert at a crime lab later ruled the rifle could not be excluded as the weapon that fired the fatal bullet — but it also could not be matched.

Thayer filed a motion for dismissal on Jan. 11. Thursday, prosecutors also sought dismissal of the case.

Sjoberg teaches math at Shahala Middle School in the Evergreen school district. Upon his Nov. 17, 2008, arrest, he was placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation. He returned to school in fall 2009.

“Craig’s really relieved to finally have this ordeal behind him,” Thayer said. “He’s back teaching, which means everything to him.”

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