

Headley pleads guilty, resigns in exchange for probation

By MITCHELL KLINE • Staff Writer • February 13, 2008

FRANKLIN — Ricky Headley pleaded guilty to five misdemeanor charges today and resigned his position as Williamson County's sheriff. Headley will serve five years probation and undergo drug and alcohol addiction assessment. He will not run for political office as part of a plea agreement he made with prosecutors.



Headley was facing 37 counts based on allegations that he illegally obtained prescription medication from Brooks Pharmacy in Nashville. Twenty-one of the charges against him were felonies.

Williamson County prosecutor Derek Smith said it was his goal to remove Headley from office as quickly as possible. Smith said the agreement he reached with Headley did just that. Pursuing the felony charges would have taken longer, allowing Headley to remain in office, Smith said.

“There are those who question why Ricky stayed in office after he was charged,” Headley’s attorney David Raybin said. “As long as he was charged with felony offenses he had no choice but to stay in office and fight. To resign would have been an admission that he was guilty of a felony. He didn’t commit any felony.”



Davidson County prosecutor Shannon Poindexter said the case against Headley was strong, but the felony charges, as they were applied to him in the pharmacy case, had not been “tested” by a jury. Headley faced 33 charges in Davidson County and four in Williamson County. The charges were combined at Headley’s request.

Williamson County Sheriff Ricky Headley, center, his wife Melissa, and Headley's attorney, David Raybin, left, address the media outside the courtroom.

Headley's resignation is effective immediately, according to Knoxville Judge Jon Kerry Blackwood, who was brought in to hear the case.

Raybin did not allow Headley to speak with reporters after the hearing. Raybin said Headley would pursue a career in gospel music.

Headley often was called the "singing sheriff." He performed at dozens of churches and community centers over the years. He even took the stage with George Jones at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville.

Beyond seeing Ricky Headley in jail for fraudulently obtaining prescription drugs, prosecutors said their first priority was removing him from the Williamson County Sheriff's Office.

Headley, 44, was the county's sheriff for nearly six years. Throughout two campaigns, he told voters that he would crack down on drug crimes. He purchased drug-sniffing dogs for the department. He assigned a deputy to work full time with the 21st Judicial District Drug Task Force. He told schoolchildren, church groups and civic organizations that his department was setting records for drug-related arrests.

And it was a drug addiction that led to his downfall.

On Wednesday, Headley pleaded guilty to five misdemeanor counts and resigned. He admitted to simple drug possession and conspiracy to commit official misconduct. He will serve five years of probation and must undergo drug and alcohol addiction assessment. He has agreed never to run for political office again.

Headley is scheduled to ask a judge for judicial diversion, which would allow his criminal record to be expunged after serving probation. He will go before Knoxville Judge Jon Kerry Blackwood, who has presided over the case, on March 24.

Pain spurred addiction

Headley was facing 37 charges, 21 of which were felonies, based on allegations that he illegally obtained thousands of pain pills from Brooks Pharmacy. Since his arrest on Jan. 31, 2007, Headley maintained that he would fight the charges and remain the county's top lawman.

Headley became addicted to pain pills while suffering from a back problem, according to his attorney, David Raybin. Investigators said he obtained more than 1,900 Hydrocodone pills in a three-month period. He allegedly sent his secretary to pick up pills for him and occasionally drove to the pharmacy wearing his uniform.

Those accusations led to Headley being charged with official misconduct in Williamson County. Williamson County prosecutor Derek Smith said Headley also asked a deputy to investigate when Glenn Brooks, the pharmacist supplying Headley with pain pills, received a bad check from a customer.

"Our first and foremost objective was to see to it that this runaway train comes to a screeching halt," Smith said. "We had to remove him from the sheriff's office. People in this community felt embarrassed by this situation."

Staff 'had no idea'

Some of those same people are now questioning whether Headley got off easy because of his position.

"Is the person on the street, who doesn't have that level of celebrity he's created because of his position, going to be given the same treatment?" Franklin resident Vince Cusomato said.

Davidson County prosecutor Shannon Poindexter said the evidence against Headley was strong, but the felony charges, as applied to him in the pharmacy case, had not been "tested" by a jury.

Headley faced 33 charges in Davidson County and four in Williamson. He would have gone to trial in July.

" Chief Deputy Dusty Rhoades, who has assumed control of the sheriff's department, said he and the rest of the command staff had no idea Headley was addicted to drugs until he was arrested. He said the news came as a shock to him and other deputies.

"Until this happened, I never could realize how a family member could not understand how another family member was addicted to drugs," Rhoades said. "We had no idea."

Williamson County Sheriff Ricky Headley listens to his attorney, David Raybin, during a press conference after he pleaded guilty to five misdemeanor charges in Williamson County Circuit Court.

