

First Conviction of Death by Impaired Boating in North Carolina

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RALEIGH, N.C. (Oct. 17, 2023) – A fatal boating collision investigation led by N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission law enforcement officers has resulted in the first conviction of Death by Impaired Boating in North Carolina.

Matthew Ferster, of Brunswick County, pled guilty to three counts of Death by Impaired Boating, also known as Sheyenne’s Law, on Aug. 28. He was sentenced to 9 ½ to 18 ½ years in prison for his role in a March 2020 boating collision that resulted in the deaths of Jennifer Hayes, 26, Megan Lynn, 21, and Garret Smith, 21, all of Columbus County.

Sgt. Matt Criscoe, from the Wildlife Commission’s Law Enforcement Division, led the investigation, with assistance from Brunswick County District Attorney Investigator Eric Hackney and more than 20 local, state and federal agencies. The investigation spanned three years, culminating in the first conviction of Sheyenne’s Law in the state.

Sheyenne’s Law, which was passed in July 2016, increased the penalty for impaired boating that results in a death or serious injury from a misdemeanor to a felony. The law was named in memory of Sheyenne Marshall, a 17-year-old from Concord, who was killed by an impaired boater as she was knee-boarding on Lake Norman in July 2015. After learning that boating while impaired was only a Class 2 misdemeanor, Marshall’s family lobbied the N.C. General Assembly for stiffer penalties for impaired boating, and a year later the legislature passed “Sheyenne’s Law.”

Sheyenne’s Law is one more tool officers have to help keep the public safe while on the water; however, they would rather prevent incidents than punish offenders. They do this through proactive enforcement efforts, such as pre-launch boating safety inspections, active boat patrols, as well as educational opportunities on and off the water, such as their annual boating safety campaigns, “On The Road, On the Water” and “Operation Dry Water.”

“North Carolina Wildlife Law Enforcement Officers continue to provide a safe and enjoyable recreational boating experience to the boating public through both proactive law enforcement efforts and educational opportunities,” said Wildlife Law Enforcement Capt. Branden Jones. “The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission would like to thank each of the assisting agencies for their time and dedication during this investigation. Partnerships such as these allow for successful prosecution of crimes and justice for the victims.”

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