

09-07-06 -- Chesney, Tallena K. -- Guilty Plea -- News Release

Former Federal Grand Juror Admits Tipping off Major Camden Drug Dealer

CAMDEN – A former federal grand juror pleaded guilty today to federal charges for tipping off the leader of a major Camden drug ring that the grand jury had indicted him and his codefendants, which allowed Darnell Tuten to avoid arrest for two-and-a-half months, U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie announced.

Tallena K. Chesney, 30, of Gloucester Township, pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Joseph H. Rodriguez to Count One of a two-count Indictment, which charges conspiracy to obstruct or impede the administration of justice. Judge Rodriguez scheduled sentencing for Dec. 20 at 2 p.m. Chesney remains free on a \$75,000 appearance bond pending sentencing.

At her plea hearing, Chesney agreed that on May 21, 2002, she was sworn in as a member of the federal grand jury sitting in Camden (“the 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury”). During the swearing-in, members of the newly empaneled 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury were instructed that a premature disclosure of grand jury action may frustrate the ends of justice by giving an opportunity to the accused to escape and become a fugitive or to destroy evidence, Chesney agreed. She also agreed that on June 4, 2002, she, as well as the other members of the newly empaneled 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury, received instructions from attorneys for the government regarding the grand jury secrecy obligations required of them.

Chesney admitted that on March 18, 2003, she was not present when attorneys for the government began submitting testimony through witnesses and other evidence regarding the matter of United States v. Darnell “Big Lips” Tuten. Chesney admitted that she was present in the grand jury on March 25, 2003, when attorneys for the government continued their submission of testimony through witnesses and other evidence regarding the Tuten case.

Chesney agreed that the evidence presented before the 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury on March 25, 2003, concerning the matter of United States v. Darnell “Big Lips” Tuten, for which she was present, involved the drug trafficking and money laundering activities of Tuten and others. Chesney also admitted that during the lunch break on that day, she telephoned a friend, the sister of Tuten, and asked to meet, saying she had something important to discuss.

Chesney admitted she met with Tuten’s sister during that lunch break and informed her that Tuten was about to be indicted by the 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury as a leader of a drug organization. Furthermore, Chesney admitted that the friend agreed to assist her in locating Tuten so that they could inform him of the impending indictment. Chesney and the friend met with Tuten during the lunch break in a park in Camden, at which time Chesney informed Tuten that he was about to be indicted, Chesney admitted.

After the lunch-time meeting with Tuten and his sister, Chesney returned to the 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury for that day’s afternoon session, she admitted. On the same day, after the 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury voted a True Bill and returned the Indictment, Chesney called Tuten’s sister and told her that her brother had in fact been indicted, she admitted.

Chesney admitted that she took these actions with the purpose of providing Tuten with the opportunity to destroy evidence and flee the area to avoid being arrested. She also agreed that based upon the disclosure of information she learned as a member of the 2002 Camden Federal Grand Jury, Tuten destroyed evidence and fled New Jersey before law enforcement had an opportunity to execute search warrants and arrest warrants relating to Tuten.

Count One of the Indictment, which was returned on Nov. 16, 2005, charging conspiracy to obstruct the administration of justice, carries a statutory maximum penalty of five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. The government will move to dismiss Count Two, charging obstruction of the administration of justice, at sentencing.

In determining an actual sentence, Judge Rodriguez will consult the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges that take into account the severity and

characteristics of the offense, the defendant's criminal history, if any, and other factors. The judge, however, is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence.

Parole has been abolished in the federal system. Defendants who are given custodial terms must serve nearly all that time.

Christie credited Special Agents with FBI Philadelphia Division, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge J.P. Weis, Investigators the Camden County Prosecutor's Office, under the direction of Acting Prosecutor James P. Lynch, and Camden City Police Department, under the direction of Camden Police Executive Arturo Venegas Jr, with developing the investigation.

The Government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Kevin T. Smith and Jason Richardson of the Criminal Division in Camden.

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Defense Attorney: Morris Pinski, Esq. Haddon Township