

Charlotte bouncers cleared in death

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Prosecutors have dismissed murder charges against three bouncers accused of killing a Charlotte nightclub patron more than two years ago.

The decision to drop the charges comes just days before Derwin Edward Gray, Joseph Stephen Pinner and John Harrill Spear were to go on trial for first-degree murder in connection with the Aug. 8, 1999, death of 22-year-old Jerry Lee Gulledge Jr.

"Proving that these guys meant to kill the victim would have been extremely difficult with the evidence I have," Mecklenburg Assistant District Attorney Glenn Cole said.

Gulledge died after struggling with bouncers at the Baha Club on South Tryon Street. Police said Gulledge lost consciousness after bouncers restrained him during the early-morning altercation.

An autopsy showed Gulledge died because of a lack of oxygen. Bruises on his neck suggest he was strangled, according to the autopsy report.

But the autopsy also showed Gulledge had been using the drugs LSD and Ecstasy. He also had apparently taken off his clothes and was naked when the bouncers confronted him, according to authorities and court documents.

Witnesses gave different accounts of the events leading up to Gulledge's death. Gulledge's friends said club bouncers assaulted him. But Baha managers said Gulledge assaulted a woman and a bouncer.

Prosecutors were prepared to cut a deal with the bouncers and allow them to plead guilty to involuntary manslaughter. The plea offer called for each of the defendants to serve at least 13 months in prison.

But Gray, 36, Pinner, 34, and Spear, 25, rejected the offer.

Defense attorneys said Friday they didn't think prosecutors could prove a crime was committed.

"I know this has been an ordeal for everybody on both sides of the case," said defense lawyer Noell Tin, who represents Pinner. "I know it has been difficult for Mr. Gulledge's family. But I'm relieved for my client."

Jerry Lee Gulledge Sr. said he and his wife are angry at the prosecutors' decision to drop the charges.

"It's anger. It's shock and surprise and disbelief that something like this could happen and not be prosecuted," Gulledge said.

The elder Gulledge filed a civil lawsuit in 1999 against the bouncers and the owners and operators of the Baha nightclub, which has since closed. The lawsuit accused the bouncers of beating his son unmercifully.

Charlotte attorney Paul Whitfield, who represented the Gulledges, said the lawsuit was settled last year for a large sum of money.

The conditions of the settlement, he said, were confidential.

Attorney John Kocher, who represented the Baha Club and its owners and operators, disputed the settlement involved a large sum of money.

He declined further comment.