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Ex-Newark funeral director convicted of selling body parts is denied parole

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AM Mark Mueller/The Star-Ledger Mark Mueller/The Star-Ledger

NEWARK — A disgraced Newark mortician who was stripped of his funeral director's license and sent to prison last year for secretly selling body parts has lost his first bid for freedom.

The State Parole Board ruled Stephen K. Finley, 47, continues to deny responsibility for his role in the macabre scheme, in which skin, bones, ligaments and other parts were harvested from the dead without permission and sold on the medical transplant market.

"He needs to gain greater insight into his behavior," the board wrote in a two-sentence explanation. "He makes excuses for his behavior and blames his father's alcoholism."

The board issued its decision after interviewing Finley on Friday. In the weeks leading up to the hearing, board members also met with family members of several victims.

Today, one of those who testified before the panel called the decision a "step in the right direction."

Robin Samoilow, who knew Finley through her church, hired him to handle the cremation of her father, Albert Teufel, in 2005. Just four months ago, Samoilow learned her father was among Finley's victims.

"The images that are now in my head will probably never leave," said Samoilow, 54, an accountant from Roselle Park. "Mr. Finley started this domino effect. It was a conscious decision on his part."

Finley, who has served just over a year of his five-year prison term, will be eligible for parole again in 17 months, though his time behind bars could be extended pending the outcome of additional charges.

In September, he is scheduled to stand trial on two counts of operating a funeral home without a license. Investigators with the state Attorney General's Office found Finley continued to make arrangements with clients at his business, Berardinelli Forest Hill Memorial Home, after his license had been revoked.

If convicted, he faces an additional 18 months in prison.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Finley was among a dozen funeral directors implicated in the multi-state ring, which was discovered by the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office. A second New Jersey mortician, Robert J. Maitner Jr., of Belleville, was sentenced to probation.

In each case, authorities have said, the funeral directors were paid \$1,000 per corpse. Finley alone sold access to up to 100 bodies.

None of the stolen parts was screened for disease, as required by law. As a result, transplant recipients nationwide may have received tissue infected with cancer, HIV or other diseases.

Barbara Bornstein said she wonders who received tissue from her cousin, Alan Geller, who suffered from hepatitis C. Geller, who was 59 when he died, has been identified as another of Finley's victims.

"The thought that anyone else would be injured by this — totally innocent victims — is just an awful thing," said Bornstein, 67, of Maplewood.

The parole board's decision Friday came two days after acting Essex County Prosecutor Robert Laurino met with family members of nearly two dozen victims to apologize for his office's handling of the Finley and Maitner cases.

Dozens of New Jersey residents didn't learn their loved ones had been violated until they were informed this year by prosecutors in Brooklyn. Though Laurino was not prosecutor at the time — the office was then headed by Attorney General Paula Dow — he said he was determined to avoid a similar lapse.

"We wanted them to know we can't unring the bell, but we're looking prospectively at what we can do from here on out," Laurino said.

Several relatives who were present said they gave Laurino credit for facing them during a meeting that occasionally grew heated. At the same time, they said they remained unsatisfied with the answers to some of their questions.

Beyond the office's failure to notify them about years-old crimes, they questioned why Finley and Maitner received relatively light sentences when compared with the lengthier prison terms imposed on complicit funeral directors in New York and Pennsylvania.

"The whole thing is just disgusting," said David Currall, 39, of Bethlehem, Pa. Maitner handled the arrangements for Currall's father, Donn, nearly six years ago.

"How does he get off with a plea deal?" Currall asked, faulting Dow in particular.

In March, Dow apologized for the failure to notify victims' relatives, saying a greater effort to find family members should have been mounted after an initial attempt was thwarted by consent forms that contained false names.

The assistant prosecutor who headed the case, Arthur Margeotes, has since been reassigned to the lower-profile remand unit, which handles cases more suited to municipal court.

Staff writer Alexi Friedman contributed to this report.

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