

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

State v. Watts

907 A.2d 147 (Me. 2006) · Decided August 31, 2006

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court vacated an order granting Donald Watts III a new trial based on alleged juror misconduct and bias. The court held that the juror’s voir dire answers and post-verdict conduct provided an insufficient basis to impeach the verdict, particularly under the restrictions of Maine Rule of Evidence 606(b), and remanded for reinstatement of the convictions.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Clifford, J.; Dana, J.; Alexander, J.; Calkins, J.; Levy, J.; Silver, J.
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	August 31, 2006
DISPOSITION	vacated
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The State appealed from the Superior Court's order granting Donald Watts III a new trial after his convictions for gross sexual assault, unlawful sexual contact, and unlawful sexual touching.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The decision to grant a new trial based on alleged juror misconduct and bias was reviewed for abuse of discretion, with the Supreme Judicial Court emphasizing that courts must exercise great caution before disturbing a jury verdict.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Maine Supreme Judicial Court opinion; precedential.
PARTIES	State of Maine v. Donald Watts III

TOPICS

- criminal procedure
- jury selection
- evidence
- appellate procedure
- standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

- criminal procedure
- evidence
- appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court had a sufficient basis to grant a new trial based on alleged juror dishonesty or inaccuracy in answering voir dire questions and alleged juror bias.
2. Whether the post-trial inquiry into the jurors' statements and conduct was permissible under M.R. Evid. 606(b).

HOLDINGS

1. The evidence provided an insufficient basis to impeach the jury verdict or find the juror biased in a manner warranting a new trial. A juror's prior consensual but uncomfortable sexual experience, the juror's discussion of that experience during deliberations, and the juror's post-verdict congratulatory call did not establish the type of dishonest answer or bias necessary to overturn the verdict.
2. Although serious allegations of juror bias based on dishonesty or inaccuracy in answering voir dire questions may justify a cautious post-trial inquiry, the inquiry in this case did not produce a sufficient basis to impeach the verdict.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"Courts should inquire into the validity of a jury verdict only in "very limited circumstances," Fuller, 660 A.2d at 917, and should be very cautious in overturning jury verdicts." (151)

"The entry is: Judgment vacated. Remanded to the Superior Court for entry of an order denying the motion for a new trial, and reinstatement of the judgments of conviction." (152)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Watts was convicted of sexually assaulting a seventeen-year-old victim at a party after she became intoxicated. After the verdict, Juror 19 asserted that Juror 26 had disclosed during deliberations a prior teenage sexual experience and had therefore answered voir dire questions inaccurately. Juror 26 testified that the experience was consensual, though uncomfortable, that she did not consider herself a victim of sexual abuse or assault, and that she had not believed it affected her impartiality. The trial court found that she had answered two questions dishonestly and was biased, but the Supreme Judicial Court concluded that the evidence did not support setting aside the verdict.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Watts was convicted on all three counts in the Superior Court. He moved for a new trial under M.R. Crim. P. 33 based on a fellow juror's allegations that another juror had answered voir dire questions dishonestly or inaccurately and was biased. After conducting a post-trial hearing over the State's objection under M.R. Evid. 606(b), the Superior Court granted a new trial. The Supreme Judicial Court of Maine vacated that order and remanded for denial of the new-trial motion and reinstatement of the convictions.

DISPOSITION

vacated

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The Superior Court was instructed to enter an order denying Watts's motion for a new trial and to reinstate the judgments of conviction.

CASES CITED

- State v. Bouchard, 2005 ME 106, ¶ 10, 881 A.2d 1130, 1134
- State v. Fuller, 660 A.2d 915, 917 (Me. 1994)
- Patterson v. Rossignol, 245 A.2d 852, 857 (Me. 1968)
- Cyr v. Michaud, 454 A.2d 1376, 1383 n. 3 (Me. 1983)
- State v. Chesnel, 1999 ME 120, ¶¶ 29, 31, 734 A.2d 1131, 1140-41
- State v. Boyce, 1998 ME 219, ¶ 8, 718 A.2d 1097, 1100