The strange death of Curtis Anthony Pelt

By Sue Williams
AFRO Staff Writer

This is a story about a young black man who apparently took his own life at a time when he seemed to have everything to live for. It is about an incident for which nobody has any nice, pat answers, and may possibly never have. It is about a phenomenon called tragedy, perhaps in its most supreme form.

The ordeal of 21-year old Curtis Anthony Pelt began on the evening of March 4 when he, his white fiancee, their 4-month old son and Curtis' best friend went to a Hyattsville restaurant for dinner.

It was to be a victory celebration. Pelt, who had been unemployed for about six months, had just received his government refund check. He was about to enter the Army as well, and was happy, finally, that the ordeal of being young, black and unemployed was about to end. It had not been easy, but, somehow, he had come through.

He said he felt like he had everything to live for.

The trio ate their dinner and sipped on their drinks undaunted, despite the minor but noticeable harassment from their waiter, who seemed to have difficulty accepting the young white woman in the presence of two black men, obviously in love with one of them. They were used to that sort of thing. It had become the least of their concerns.

When they had finished, they walked towards the parking lot, laughing and having a good time, when they heard the manager of the restaurant calling them and running towards them, obviously disturbed.

They stopped and asked him what was wrong, to which he responded that they had not paid their $25 bill.

Somewhat stunned, they began explaining to the manager that there must have been some mistake. They had no reason not to pay; they had plenty of money, something they had not had in some time...

But the manager would not be swayed, and after a short while, his accusations prompted a debate between himself and young Pelt.

In a statement to the police, the manager said that Pelt pulled a knife on him (a charge vehemently refuted by Pelt's best friend and his fiancee). Whatever happened, the police were called and the three were taken to the Prince Georges County Department of Corrections. Pelt was to be booked.

It was a blow, and while the three felt that they instinctively understood the real reason they were being picked up that night, they were hurt and resentful.

It seemed to make no difference that, because the offense for which they had been picked up was minor they had been taken to the Department of Corrections instead of the Prince Georges Police Department, which has long held the reputation of being racist and unnecessarily harsh in its dealings with blacks.

And, as they were led into the brightly lit main lobby of the Department of Corrections building, it made no difference that the officers in charge went out of their way to let them know they shouldn't be too alarmed, that they would be able to leave if the bondsman came up with a mere $100 for Pelt.

The fact was that they were there, and they knew they should not be.

According to Jim O'Neill, young Pelt was booked and taken into a holding cell to await the bail money that would have released him. As the arrest papers were being processed, and as his fiancee called bondsmen to make the bail arrangements, the guard on duty went back to check on Pelt, who was sitting on his cot, quiet and apparently deep in thought, but okay.

That was 10 minutes after he had been locked up. Nine minutes later, the guard went to check on Pelt again, and could not hold back his gasp of horror as he looked on the body of the young man hanging by his own shoestrings from the bars of his cell.

It had taken Pelt less than 20 minutes to plot and execute his own death.

Jim O'Neill, a public information officer for the Prince Georges County Department of Corrections, had little explanation for what had happened.

"I don't know... I don't understand it," O'Neill muttered over the phone. "Pelt wasn't depressed, he didn't offer any resistance to the officers who arrested him or booked him."

"He knew that his fiancee was making bail arrangements for him and that all he would need to go free that night was $100."

"If he had seemed the slightest bit depressed or unhappy," O'Neill continued, "we would have kept him in our view, out on a bench. But he just gave no indication..."

The NAACP at first called the incident suspicious and wanted a full-scale investigation. The people in Prince Georges County are not fond of their law enforcement officers, and the incident of the shooting of three police officers by Terence Johnson three years ago has not been erased from the memories of many. There have been too many incidents and too few questions answered...

But even that civil rights backed off a bit when it began to seem obvious that Pelt had wanted to die. The more the case was investigated, the less evidence was found to indicate that there had been foul play.

O'Neill said that even the charge that the death of Pelt was racially motivated would be hard to prove. All of the officers on duty that night, from the arresting officer to the desk officer to the guard to the switchboard operator...were black themselves.

And, he said, Pelt was in a cell by himself. There was no way any of the other prisoners could have gotten to Pelt to kill him, or, if they had somehow managed to find a way to do that, it would have taken them longer than nine minutes...

The medical examiner's report said

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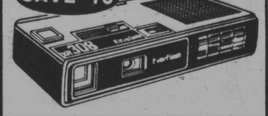

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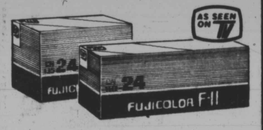

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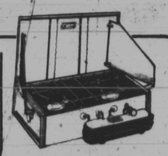

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SMILING SENIOR — Milton Kent, Calvert County senior, is all smiles as he is congratulated by Sunpapers Publisher Donald H. Patterson for receiving the paper's Minority Scholarship in Journalism.

Tight city budget to result in service cutbacks, some layoffs

The city finance department's proposed $1.2 billion operating budget for fiscal 1982 will mean cutbacks in some services and possible layoffs, Mayor William Donald Schaefer said this week.

The finance department presented the budget proposal for the fiscal year beginning in July to the Board of Estimates, which will review it and possibly change it. The proposal, a 3 percent increase over the current budget, will be presented to the city council for final approval in about three weeks.

The current property tax rate of $5.93 per $100 of assessed property value would remain the same under the proposed fiscal 1982 budget.

Budget Director George Piendak said Reagan administration proposals to cut federal aid could require changes in the city budget to cut some programs.

City Councilman Clarence Burns said 59 percent of the budget money comes from state and federal governments.

Education, law enforcement and fire protection were the top priorities. The school system would receive a 30 percent budget increase, the police department would receive 37 percent more money and the fire department would get an 11 percent budget increase.

"I think we ought to reassure everyone that we have no intention of laying off any policemen or firemen," Schaefer said, "but other agencies may suffer."

The budget proposal includes a 1.4 percent reduction in Baltimore's 34,407 employees. But budget officials said that will not necessarily mean layoffs because of normal attrition and other factors.

Burns said it is "fairly obvious" there will be layoffs in some agencies.

"Everybody's going to feel it this time," he said.

Officials said the $35.4 million increase in the budget would be just enough to cover pay raises negotiated earlier for the city's 36,000 employees.

Under the proposed budget, city trash collections would be reduced and several health programs dependent on federal aid would be ended.

—Pelt

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there were no marks on the dead youth's body to indicate there had been any struggle. There is nothing, anywhere, that says that somebody other than Pelt himself...wanted him to die.

Pelt's best friend, who ran to the cell and saw his buddy hanging when the guard gasped that something was wrong, has had little to say about the incident, except that Pelt wouldn't have done it. There was no reason to, not now...

And Pelt's fiancee and mother feel much the same way.

But the fact remains that a young black man is dead, casting the only suspicion on this condition known as happiness—those feelings people say they have that make them feel like they have "everything to live for."

If foul play was involved, it was so artfully and skillfully done that all anybody can do now is accept the "fact" that a young boy wanted to die, despite good times that were coming his way.

Incidentally, the matter of the unpaid bill was never resolved.

Women's health conference slated

The First Annual Health Care Conference for Women will be held April 21 through May 26.

The conference, which is free and open to public, will be held on consecutive Tuesdays from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Urban Teacher Center, 2003 Presbury St.

The purpose of the conference is to stimulate women's thinking and to establish the need for further inquiry into the many physical and mental problems they face each day at home and at work.

Workshops and presentations will include such areas as general health awareness, physical and mental health problems, resources and educational opportunities, exercises and nutrition, and the suicide rate among black women.

Health care presentators will include representatives from The Board of School Commissioners, the Department of Recreation, Home Economics Department of the Baltimore City Public Schools, The House of Ruth, Georgetown University, The National Institute of Health and the Medical and Nursing professions.

For more information and to register, call the conference coordinator Betty J. Wilson at 396-6601.

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