

**IN THE COURT OF APPEALS
ELEVENTH APPELLATE DISTRICT
TRUMBULL COUNTY, OHIO**

STATE OF OHIO,	:	MEMORANDUM OPINION
Plaintiff-Appellee,	:	
- vs -	:	CASE NO. 2010-T-0082
LOUIS D. PONZI, JR.,	:	
Defendant-Appellant.	:	

Criminal Appeal from the Court of Common Pleas, Case No. 2007 CR 00714.

Judgment: Appeal dismissed.

Dennis Watkins, Trumbull County Prosecutor, and *LuWayne Annos*, Assistant Prosecutor, Administration Building, Fourth Floor, 160 High Street, N.W., Warren, OH 44481-1092 (For Plaintiff-Appellee).

Louis D. Ponzi, Jr., pro se, PID: 544-332, Belmont Correctional Institution, P.O. Box 540, St. Clairsville, OH 43950-0540 (Defendant-Appellant).

DIANE V. GRENDELL, J.

{¶1} On June 23, 2010, appellant, pro se, filed a motion for leave to file a delayed appeal pursuant to App.R. 5(A). Appellant appeals from the trial court's judgment entry of his conviction and sentence of April 10, 2008, in which he entered a plea of guilty to thirteen counts of rape and gross sexual imposition. The trial court sentenced him to serve an aggregate prison term of twenty years.

{¶2} Appellant now appeals, and requests leave to file a delayed appeal, over two years after the April 10, 2008 judgment was entered by the trial court.

{¶3} Appellee filed a response in opposition to the motion on June 28, 2010.

{¶4} App.R. 5(A)(1) provides, in relevant part:

{¶5} “After the expiration of the thirty day period provided by App.R. 4(A) for the filing of a notice of appeal as of right, an appeal may be taken by a defendant with leave of the court to which the appeal is taken in ***[c]riminal proceedings[.]” App.R. 5(A)(2) states that “[a] motion for leave to appeal shall be filed with the court of appeals and shall set forth the reasons for the failure of the appellant to perfect an appeal as of right.”

{¶6} In what is captioned as an “Affidavit of Verity,” appellant sets forth the following as his reasons for failing to perfect a timely appeal: 1) after his sentencing, his defense counsel no longer represented him and failed to file a notice of appeal on his behalf within thirty days; 2) neither the court nor his trial counsel advised him of his right to appeal; 3) he lacked understanding and knowledge of appellate procedure; and 4) after his recent receipt of the sentencing transcript, he learned that the court made a provision for an appeal.

{¶7} Given that over two years have elapsed between the time of appellant’s conviction and sentence until the filing of his motion for delayed appeal, it is evident that appellant was not diligent in taking the proper steps to protect his own rights. Further, the reasons submitted by appellant as the cause for the delay do not justify his delay in initiating a direct appeal.

{¶8} The dissent is confused as to the scope of a criminal defendant's constitutional rights. Contrary to the dissent's view, the constitutional rights of criminal defendants are *not* unlimited. "[T]here is no constitutional right to an appeal." *Abney v. United States* (1977), 431 U.S. 651, 656. "In Ohio, the right to an appeal is a creature of statute." *State v. Trent*, 6th Dist. No. E-07-039, 2009-Ohio-508, at ¶16, citing R.C. 2953.02. Like other statutory rights, the right to appeal is waived if not timely exercised. *In re Lefever*, 5th Dist. No. CT2004-0005, 2004-Ohio-6857, at ¶15.

{¶9} To exercise those constitutional and statutory rights of judicial review of a conviction, a criminal defendant must act timely or otherwise meet the statutory requirements for a delayed appeal. In this case, appellant did neither. Contrary to the dissent's view, the Ohio General Assembly did not allow criminal defendants an open-ended appeal period. In this case, the dissent, under the guise of constitutional protection, would provide criminal defendants such an open-ended appeal opportunity. The dissent provides convicted criminal defendants with more rights than required by the Constitution or statutes. Expecting convicted criminals to file appeals timely or provide legitimate reasons why they did not appeal timely does not violate the Constitution, statutes, or decisions of the Ohio Supreme Court.

{¶10} For the foregoing reasons, appellant's motion for leave to file a delayed appeal is hereby overruled.

{¶11} Appeal dismissed.

CYNTHIA WESTCOTT RICE, J., concurs,

COLLEEN MARY O'TOOLE, J., dissents with a Dissenting Opinion.

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{¶12} I respectfully dissent from the majority.

{¶13} Appellant, a pro se litigant, has a constitutional right to appeal his conviction. *State v. Clark* (May 24, 1991), 11th Dist. No. 90-P-2211, 1991 Ohio App. LEXIS 2371, at 9-10. In cases wherein someone is found guilty and sentenced in a criminal matter and there is no prejudice to the state in the delay, a motion for delayed appeal should be granted. The state of Ohio and its taxpayers will be spending their hard earned tax dollars to feed, clothe, house, as well as provide medical care for appellant. I humbly suggest that we should accept the delayed appeal, and review the record before this court to make sure the trial court did not err. There is no specific time limit for appellant to assert his constitutional right to appeal. In fact, the rule provides specifically for a delayed appeal if the thirty-day deadline to file its original appeal is missed and it specifically does not set a deadline for this delayed appeal to be filed.

{¶14} In this case, appellant has filed a request for a delayed appeal, but the majority does not feel inclined to accept it because they believe the reasons he submitted as the cause for the delay do not justify waiting to initiate a direct appeal. The majority, in emphasizing form over function, is placing an unnecessary barrier in front of appellant by its technical reading of the rule. The denial of the constitutional right to appeal is, in itself, sufficient to sustain the request in this instance.

{¶15} As appellate judges, we are bound by our oaths to uphold the Constitution and laws of this state. However, mechanical enforcement of a single appellate rule

should not take precedence over enforcement of the law as a whole. The Rules of Appellate Procedure are meant to provide a framework for the orderly disposition of appeals. *In re Beck*, 7th Dist. No. 00 BA 52, 2002-Ohio-3460, at ¶29. However, “[o]nly a flagrant, substantial disregard for the court rules can justify a dismissal on procedural grounds.” *Id.* at ¶28, quoting *DeHart v. Aetna Life Ins. Co.* (1982), 69 Ohio St.2d 189, 193. The Supreme Court of Ohio has, again and again, instructed the lower courts of this state that cases are to be decided on the merits, and that the various rules of court are to be applied so as to achieve *substantial* justice. Cf. *State ex rel. Lapp Roofing & Sheet Metal Co., Inc. v. Indus. Comm.*, 117 Ohio St.3d 179, 2008-Ohio-850, at ¶12; *DeHart* at 192. Consequently, strict adherence to the appellate rules must yield when a procedural error is inadvertent, and a party or counsel acted in good faith. Cf. *Beck* at ¶29.

{¶16} The Staff Note to the 1994 Amendment to App.R. 5(A) also indicates that the rule is to be given a flexible, liberal interpretation, and not used to dismiss appeals willy-nilly. Prior to the amendment, defendants were required to set forth the errors claimed and evidence relating to the claimed errors. *Id.* The amendment merely retained the requirement that the would-be appellant set forth his or her reasons for the delay. *Id.* In explanation, the Staff Note provides:

{¶17} “Although there was also concern about the fairness of requiring usually indigent, and frequently unrepresented, criminal defendants to demonstrate (often without the benefit of a transcript) the probability of error, the primary reason for this amendment is judicial economy. Denial of leave to file a delayed appeal for failure to demonstrate the probability of error usually leads to subsequent litigation of the issue by

direct appeals to the Ohio and United States Supreme Courts, petitions to vacate sentence under R.C. 2953.21 et seq., and appeals thereon, and/or federal habeas corpus petitions and appeals. Review of the merits by the courts of appeals upon the initial (albeit delayed) appeal would thus avoid the presentation of the probability of error issue to as many as nine subsequent tribunals.”

{¶18} In denying this delayed appeal, the majority also ignores the intent of our General Assembly. The framework for sentencing in criminal matters – despite the changes wrought by *State v. Foster*, 109 Ohio St.3d 1, 2006-Ohio-856 – is still provided by Senate Bill 2. A principal purpose of the General Assembly in reforming Ohio’s sentencing structure in Senate Bill 2, including procedure relating to appeals, was cost containment. *State v. Grider*, 8th Dist. No. 82072, 2003-Ohio-3378, at ¶29, citing Griffin and Katz, *Sentencing Consistency: Basic Principles Instead of Numerical Grid: The Ohio Plan* (2002), 53 Case W.R.L.Rev. 1. R.C. 2929.11(A) mandates that “[t]he overriding purposes of felony sentencing are to protect the public from future crime by the offender and others and to punish the offender.” R.C. 2929.12(A) grants trial courts broad discretion in fashioning sentences that fulfill these overriding purposes of felony sentencing, and mandates that our trial courts consider the listed seriousness and recidivism factors when doing so. As appellant pleaded guilty to the crimes for which he was sentenced, the errors he might raise on appeal are limited. Surely it would be most cost effective for this court to consider any such alleged error, and so bring this matter to a quick, *final* close.

{¶19} In sum, the majority, hypnotized by App.R. 5(A), ignores the mandate of the Supreme Court of Ohio that court rules be construed so cases are decided on the

merits. It ignores the intent of the General Assembly that the courts deal with criminal cases in the most cost effective manner complying with justice. I humbly suggest this is not a proper application of the appellate rules.

{¶20} This court has an affirmative, constitutional and statutory duty to review the trial court for error. We are the constitutional quality control, and backstop for the citizens of the state of Ohio. By skirting this appeal, as well as others, I humbly submit we are not performing our duties to the best of our statutory and constitutional obligation.

{¶21} This writer further notes that nothing precludes appellant from refiling his delayed appeal pursuant to App.R. 5(A) and clearing the ministerial obstacle put in place by the majority.

{¶22} Thus, I respectfully dissent.