

# Abuser pleads guilty to strangling Cheektowaga woman

A man accused of strangling the woman he lived with and then setting their bedroom on fire to cover up the crime pleaded guilty in Erie County Court Monday morning as jury selection was set to begin in his murder trial.

Thomas L. Murphy, 59, was indicted in May 2015 of charges of arson and second degree murder in the death of Jean Hartwig, 63. With the court ready to begin questioning prospective jurors, Murphy notified his attorneys Monday that he would like to accept a previously rejected plea offer.

After consulting with the victim's family, prosecutors agreed.

Murphy pleaded guilty before Judge Thomas P. Franczyk to first degree manslaughter. Franczyk said he would consider a sentence of 23 years when Murphy returns to court on Dec. 5.

Hartwig's death was called "an extreme case of domestic violence."

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2015, when Cheektowaga police were asked to check on the woman's well-being at the couple's flat in the Williamstowne Senior Apartments on William Street.

The officers were responding to a call from a Wegmans where Hartwig worked, after she failed to show up and couldn't be reached. After the officers knocked on the apartment's door, they heard smoke detectors going off inside and smoke

started to leak from under the door. They forced the door open and found Murphy standing inside. Following the smoke to the bedroom, they saw a person's body in the fire.

The officers tried to put out the flames with a fire extinguisher but could not reach the victim. Firefighters from Doyle Hose Company put out the fire and Hartwig's body was recovered. An autopsy concluded that she had been strangled.

Police said Murphy already had been arrested once in 2015 on a charge that he held Hartwig against her will, and Hartwig obtained an order of protection instructing Murphy to "refrain from offensive behavior."

He has been jailed without bail since his arrest.

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