

Inmate gone, but Heath still rattled

Few in town knew of man's criminal charge

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The nursing-home resident was 53 years old, a big, bald guy with an injured leg and brain damage so severe he seemed drunk. He also was accused of attempted murder, but most people in town didn't know about that.

He lived quietly at Heath Nursing Care Center for more than a year, until this week, when he decided to leave.

By night, nearly everyone in Heath knew about John "Jeff" Stroud.

His escape on Thursday shut down schools in the Licking County village, and his capture made headlines. Thirty-six hours after it all began, the city's mayor still wasn't sure how it happened.

When Heath residents called to ask why Stroud, a Portsmouth native, was living in their backyard — in a nursing home, of all places — and why even the police didn't know about him, Mayor Mark Johns could only wonder the same things.

"I really didn't have solid answers for them," Johns said yesterday.

Stroud was returned yesterday to jail in Scioto County, where he is accused of shooting at a deputy sheriff in January 2011. A judge there revoked his bond, which was contingent upon him staying at the Heath nursing home, where staff members knew of his criminal charge.

Heath police say Stroud smashed a window in his room and sneaked out on Thursday in the predawn darkness. They alerted the public and released two photos of Stroud, one a driver's license shot in which he is smiling and looking at the camera, and the other a 2011 mug shot in which Stroud's eyes are rolled to the ceiling and his mouth is open.

As Heath schools closed or locked their doors on Thursday, authorities searched for Stroud on the ground and from the sky. It was ultimately a call from a resident complaining of a prowler that led police to find him near a trailer park late that night.

Seventeen hours had passed, but Stroud had traveled less than 2 miles.

He appeared in Licking County Municipal Court yesterday on a misdemeanor charge of criminal damaging — for the broken window at the nursing home — and Judge Michael

Higgins set his bond at \$100,000. Higgins struggled to understand Stroud, who slurred his words and said someone had stolen his money. He told Higgins he didn't understand the charge against him. The judge entered a not-guilty plea.

Hours later, Stroud was on his way back to Scioto County. But few people were resting easy.

Certainly not Todd Stroud, who said his brother isn't the monster he's been made out to be, but rather a despondent cancer survivor who underwent a bone-marrow transplant nearly 18 years ago only to have a new tumor appear in his brain early last year. That's also when he was involved in a four-hour standoff with deputies in Scioto County, allegedly shot at one and was in return hit by gunfire .

He was released under bond and at one point permitted to travel to Arizona for brain surgery. He was found incompetent to stand trial and ordered to remain at the nursing home pending further competency tests.

Todd Stroud, 48, wearily searched for a new lawyer for his brother yesterday and said John Stroud is a simple guy who likes to be alone and outside, fishing and hunting and riding his Harley.

"He's frustrated just sitting in a room," Todd Stroud said. "He just wants to go home and die, is what he says."

Mayor Johns wasn't content either, because though Stroud is gone from his city, the questions his presence stirred up remained. Why was he there? Todd Stroud said the family chose the Heath center because it had a secure unit and could care for John Stroud, who was suffering both from the cancer and a gunshot wound in his leg that he suffered in his clash with deputies last year.

He paid for his own care there, about \$8,000 a month, Todd Stroud said.

But why didn't the police chief know he was there? Johns said he plans to explore whether the city has the authority to require institutions to notify local authorities about cases such as Stroud's. And if the city can't do it, he's going to find out if the state can.

Stroud is gone, Johns said, but these investigations have only begun.

"The gun has just sounded," he said.

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