



Erie's Diehl-Armstrong recalled as unique and deadly criminal

By Ed Palattella

Posted May 1, 2018 at 12:01 AM

One of the key defendants in the pizza bomber case died in federal prison on Tuesday, where she was serving a sentence of life plus 30 years.

Marjorie Diehl-Armstrong vowed to fight her conviction in the pizza bomber case until she died.

Her battle has ended with her guilt intact.

Her death on Tuesday, at a federal prison in Texas, ended her appeals and closed out the homicidal career of one of the most infamous criminals in Erie history.

She was a killer whose name eventually became known worldwide because of the bizarre series of events that unfolded in Summit Township the afternoon of Aug. 28, 2003, when pizza deliveryman Brian Wells was killed when a bomb locked to his neck exploded after he robbed a bank off upper Peach Street.

Diehl-Armstrong, 68, was serving a sentence of life plus 30 years at the all-women Federal Medical Center in Carswell, near Fort Worth, when she was pronounced dead.

The exact cause of death was not immediately available, but Diehl-Armstrong had suffered for years from breast cancer, a disease that she pledged to beat as soundly as she said she would beat her conviction. A spokeswoman for the federal prison at Carswell said only that Diehl-Armstrong died of natural causes.

Diehl-Armstrong, who suffered from bipolar disorder, was a musical prodigy and highly intelligent student until mental illness took hold of her in her early 20s in Erie, the only place, outside of prison, where she ever lived.

She became a smart yet troubled woman who spent much of her life trying to manipulate others, especially men. Diehl-Armstrong was directly connected to slayings of three men, including Wells and her boyfriend James Roden, whom she shot to death and stuffed in a freezer in mid-August 2003 to keep him quiet in the pizza bomber case.

Her third victim was her boyfriend Robert Thomas, an Erie resident whom she fatally shot in 1984 on their living room couch. She argued self-defense, claiming Thomas abused her, and was acquitted in 1988 after one of the best-known trials at the Erie County Courthouse at the time. She promised after the trial to never get in trouble again. But two more deaths, of Roden and Wells, followed in 2003.

After her arrests, in the Thomas case, in 1984, and the Roden case, in 2003, authorities found Diehl-Armstrong's house filled with food and junk, including, in the Thomas case, stacks of rotting surplus government butter and cheese. She denied she was a hoarder, but hoarding was yet another trait of her bipolar disorder.

"A coldly calculated criminal recidivist and serial killer," is how a federal magistrate judge, Martin C. Carlson, of Harrisburg, described her in denying one of her appeals, in April 2014. Her cases, Carlson wrote, were "marked by brutality, sadism, cruelty and the morbid abuse of her victims, both living and dead."

'She was a whirlwind'

In the pizza bomber case, Diehl-Armstrong was sentenced to life plus 30 years on Feb. 28, 2011, after she was convicted on Nov. 1, 2010, following a three-week trial at the federal courthouse on Perry Square. She was found guilty of the felonies of armed bank robbery, conspiracy to commit armed bank robbery and using a destructive device in a crime of violence.

Diehl-Armstrong's personality was as memorable as her crimes. She could be as witty as she could be chilling, as insightful as she could be profane. She was just as apt to discuss the poetry of Sylvia Plath and John Milton as she was the intricacies of the criminal justice system and the details of the convoluted pizza bomber case, one of the strangest in the history of the FBI.

The investigation and prosecution of the case took more than seven years, partly because Diehl-Armstrong's erratic mental behavior led to her being ruled incompetent to stand trial for a time. One hallmark of her bipolar disorder was her "pressured speech," her endless desire to talk, at a fast pace, about whatever was on her mind. She called her lawyers and the Erie Times-News constantly, sometimes as many as twice an hour, to pontificate on her case from prison.

"She was a whirlwind," her lawyer in the pizza bomber trial, Douglas Sughrue, of Pittsburgh, said Tuesday. "You didn't know what you were going to get from her at anytime. In one three-hour meeting in jail, I think I got three different moods of hers."

Sughrue recalled moments when the listener could not help but chuckle at what Diehl-Armstrong had to say.

"One thing I will always say, she did love life," Sughrue said. "She was funny and smart and despite the tragic situation in which I met her she was able to keep a sense of humor and I will always remember her for that."

Diehl-Armstrong saw her bipolar disorder, or manic-depressive illness, as both a blessing and a curse. While she always denied she was a killer, and particularly a serial killer, she never hesitated to put herself in the same class as artists, politicians and others who suffered from bipolar disorder but achieved greatness.

"If there was anything for a panacea for me, don't you think I would take it?" she once said of her mental illness. "You have to remember, and I am not just bragging about it, but it has been linked to genius. Lincoln, Churchill, Teddy Roosevelt, Van Gogh, Beethoven, Hemingway — some of the greatest artists and writers who ever lived were bipolar."

Diehl-Armstrong, whose narcissism was also extreme, died without any immediate relatives as survivors. She was an only child whose mother, Agnes Diehl, a well-known teacher in the Erie School District, died at 83 in 2000. Her father, Harold Diehl, died at 95 in 2014, estranged from his daughter. The U.S. attorney's office alleged that she participated in the pizza bomber case to raise money to hire a hit man, Kenneth E. Barnes, to kill her father so she could inherit the family fortune.

Diehl-Armstrong was married once, to Erie resident Richard Armstrong. He died of a brain hemorrhage in August 1992, about a year and eight months after they were married. Armstrong was found to have died of natural causes.

Richard Armstrong suffered from mental illness, as did Robert Thomas, the boyfriend Diehl-Armstrong shot to death in 1984. Her bipolar disorder became an issue in that case as her prosecution was delayed for years until she was found mentally competent to stand trial.

Her lawyer in the Thomas case, Leonard Ambrose, said the Erie County District Attorney's Office never should have prosecuted her in the Thomas case, but should have agreed to have her institutionalized for the rest of her life because she was a danger to society.

"She happened to be smart, which made her even more dangerous and manipulative and devious," Ambrose said Tuesday. "She should not have been tried in the first instance."

Once Diehl-Armstrong was acquitted of killing Thomas, Ambrose said, "it was only a matter of time before she did the same thing again."

A deadly career

In the slaying of James Roden, whose body was found in the freezer, Diehl-Armstrong pleaded guilty but mentally ill to third-degree murder, and was sentenced in Erie County Court in January 2005 to seven to 20 years in state prison. She remained in state prison while the investigation in the pizza bomber case continued. It led to her indictment in 2007.

At the pizza bomber trial, Diehl-Armstrong claimed she was framed by her former fiance, William A. Rothstein, an eccentric Erie handyman and robotics teacher who was believed to have made the homemade bomb that was locked around the neck of Brian Wells. Rothstein died of cancer at 60 in 2004.

Diehl-Armstrong also blamed her co-defendant in the pizza bomber case, Kenneth Barnes, who pleaded guilty, testified against her and was initially sentenced to 45 years in federal prison. Barnes later had the sentence cut in half. He is 63 and at the Federal Correctional Institution at Coleman, Florida, northeast of Orlando. His release date is in 2027.

At the pizza bomber trial, the U.S. attorney's office said no one manipulated Diehl-Armstrong, and that she knew what she was doing throughout the plot. Assistant U.S. Attorney Marshall Piccinini, who prosecuted, called Diehl-Armstrong evil and said greed motivated her.

"She does have mental illness," Piccinini said at Diehl-Armstrong's sentencing. "But when you combine this woman's serious mental illness with her personality disorder, her narcissism, her paranoia, her deception, her manipulateness, you combine that into one person with evil and this is the type of crime that results. The combination of Marjorie Diehl-Armstrong and her propensity toward violence in this particular case proved deadly."

Diehl-Armstrong bristled as such characterizations, no matter how true they were in the end.

"It is a travesty," she said of her conviction, in a phone interview in December 2015. "We are going to keep on fighting this. This is an absolutely unmistakable miscarriage of justice.

"We are never going to give up," she said. "It is a political thing. They just want to cover it up. I am going to fight this until my dying breath; hopefully that will not come along too soon."

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Death of Brian Douglas Wells



American murder victim

Also called Brian Wells

Brian Douglas Wells was an American pizza delivery man who was killed by a remotely controlled bomb fastened to his neck, under coercion from the maker of the bomb. After he was apprehended by the police for robbing a bank, the bomb was detonated. —*Wikipedia* ...[More](#)

Born:	November 15, 1956
Died:	August 28, 2003 (aged 46) in Erie
Manner of Death:	Assault (homicide)
Country of Citizenship:	United States

Sources: Wikidata, Wikipedia, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
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