

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, V. JOSEPH FELIX VENTURA, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

Ponente: REYES-CARPIO, A., J.

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REYES-CARPIO, A., J.:

This is an Appeal,[1] filed under Rule 122 of the 2000 Revised Rules of Criminal Procedure, seeking the reversal of the Decision,[2] dated December 19, 2012, rendered by the Regional Trial Court of Parañaque City, Branch 259 in Criminal Case Nos. 09-0739 and 09- 0740, entitled "People of the Philippines vs. Joseph Felix Ventura."

THE CASE

In two (2) separate Informations,[3] both dated July 6, 2009, accused-appellant Joseph Felix Ventura was charged with possession and sale of illegal drugs under Republic Act No. 9165 committed as follows:

Violation of Article II, Section 11 –

"That on or about the 3[rd] day of July 2009, in the City of Parañaque, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, above-named accused, not being authorized by law to possess, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously have in his possession and under his control and custody one (1) heat sealed transparent plastic sachet, containing white crystalline substance, weighing 0.01 gram, which upon qualitative examination gave positive result for the test for Methylamphetamine Hydrochloride, a dangerous drug in violation of the above-cited law." [4]

Violation of Article II, Section 5 –

"That on or about the 3[rd] day of July 2009, in the City of Parañaque, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, not being lawfully authorized by law, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously sell, trade, administer, dispense, deliver, give away to another, distribute, dispatch in transit or transport one (1) heat-sealed transparent plastic sachet weighing 0.01 gram to Police Poseur Buyer PO2 Domingo Julaton which content of the said plastic sachet when tested was found positive to be Methamphetamine Hydrochloride, a dangerous drug." [5]

Upon arraignment, accused-appellant entered a plea of "not guilty." [6]

PROSECUTION'S VERSION

At around 11:30 in the evening of July 2, 2009, a confidential informant went to the Station Anti-Illegal Drugs Special Operation Task Group (SAIDSOTG) of the Parañaque police and reported the illegal drug activity of a certain "Christopher Ventura" in Sitio San Juan, Baclaran, Parañaque City. [7]

Based on the said information, a team was formed to conduct a buy-bust operation composed of the designated poseur-buyer PO2 Domingo Julaton, his immediate back-up PO3 Fernan Acbang, backup operatives SPO1 Ricky Macaraeg and PO2 Elbert Ocampo. Julaton was given two (2) pieces of Php.100.00 bills with his initial "D" written in the middle as marked money and instructed to purchase Php.200.00 worth of methamphetamine

hydrochloride, commonly known as shabu.[8] They also agreed that Julaton would remove a towel placed on top of his head to serve as a signal that the transaction had concluded. Thus, the team coordinated with the PDEA and subsequently proceeded to the target area together with the informant at around 1:35 in the morning of July 3, 2009. Upon arrival thereat, the informant and Julaton walked ahead of the rest of the team members who discreetly followed them.

They approached the suspect and the informant told the former that Julaton was a bus driver who needed to buy shabu. Julaton handed the marked money to the suspect who, in turn, opened a small green canister and took out a small plastic sachet containing white crystalline substance. Thereafter, Julaton made the prearranged signal and PO3 Acbang rushed to their location. Julaton identified himself as a police officer while Acbang held Joseph's hand. Acbang also recovered the buy-bust money while Julaton seized the canister from which the suspect took out the sachet purportedly containing drugs.

Since it was dark at the buy-bust scene, the group took the suspect to the barangay hall and there, Julaton marked the sachet subject of the sale with the letters "DJ" and discovered another sachet inside the canister which he marked with the characters "DJ- 1." The canister itself was labeled "DJ-2." A Spot Report No. PS3-070309-54,[9] dated July 3, 2009, was prepared, the pertinent portion of which reads:

"EVIDENCE SIEZED (sic)/RECOVERED:

Dangerous Drugs: Two (2) small heat sealed transparent plastic sachet containing white crystalline substance suspected as shabu weighing more or less 0.02g.

x x x

TIME/DATE/PLACE OF ARREST: On or about 2:15 am July 3, 2009 at Sitio Sn Juan, Baclaran, Parañaque City

TYPE OF OPERATIONS

(x) Buy-Bust () Raid/Saturation Drive () Test But

() SW Operation () SW Nr _____ issued by Judge _____ of RTC Br

() Interdiction () Others (Specify) _____

OPERATING UNIT: PO3 Acbang and PO2 Julaton, SAID-SOTG, Parañaque City

OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION:

Prepared by:

PO2 Domingo T. Julaton III
Duty Investigator"[10]

A Receipt of Property Seized[11] was also prepared in the presence of accused-appellant and Barangay Ex-O Jaime Marzan, Tanod Bonifacio Cabugos which reads as follows:

"Ito ay pagpapatunay na kinumpiska nina: PO2 DOMINGO JULATON alagad ng Station Anti Illegal Drugs Special Operation Task Group (SAID-SOTG) na nakatalaga sa Brgy La Huerta, Lungsod ng Parañaque ang mga nakalistang bagay/kagamitan mula kay JOSEPH VENUTRA y FELIX, Sa lugar na pinangyarihan SITIO SAN JUAN, BACLARAN, P.QUE CITY, sa ganap na 2:15am/PM JULY 3, 2009

ITEM NR

QTY

DESCRIPTION

1

2

TWO (2) PCS OF SMALL HEAT SEALED TRANSPARENT PLASTIC SACHET CONTAINS WHITE CRYSTALLINE SUBSTANCE SUSPECTED AS SHABU

2

2

TWO PCS OF ONE HUNDRED PISO (sic) BILL WITH S# QS527003 AND TE 320282"[12]

Photographs[13] were taken by Acbang and the suspect was identified as accused-appellant Joseph Ventura and not "Christopher Ventura." [14]

The foregoing evidence with accused-appellant were both taken to the SAIDSOTG office. A request for laboratory examination[15] was prepared and pursuant thereto, Julaton and Acbang took the specimen to the crime laboratory. The examination yielded the following results, reflected in Physical Science Report No. D-325-09S,[16] to wit:

"SPECIMEN SUBMITTED:

A – One (1) tape-sealed brown envelope containing one (1) sealed green transparent plastic box with markings 'DJ-2' and marked as 'A-1' further containing two (2) heat-sealed transparent plastic sachets each having white crystalline substance with the following markings and recorded net weights:

A-1-1/DJ = 0.01 gram A-1-2/DJ-1 = 0.01 gram

PURPOSE OF LABORATORY EXAMINATION:

To determine the presence of dangerous drugs. xxx

FINDINGS :

Qualitative examination conducted on the above stated specimens A-1-1 and A-1-2 gave POSITIVE result to the tests for Methamphetamine hydrochloride, a dangerous drug. Xxx

CONCLUSION :

Specimens A-1-1 and A-1-2 contain Methamphetamine hydrochloride, a dangerous drug. xxx

REMARKS: TIME AND DATE COMPLETED: 0610H 03 July 2009

EXAMINED BY:

(Signed)

ABRAHAM VERDE TECSON

Police Chief Inspector

Chief, Phy Sci Sec/Forensic Chemist"[17]

Accused-appellant, meanwhile, underwent a drug test but the results were not revealed.[18] Acbang and Julaton also executed a Joint Affidavit,[19] dated July 4, 2009, narrating their version of the events leading to the arrest of accused-appellant.

Prosecution presented the testimony of Inspector Abraham Tecson who conducted the examination on the specimen sent to the laboratory, and that of PO2 Julaton.

In support of their testimonies, prosecution presented the following documentary evidence, among other things: (1) Letter Request for Laboratory Examination; (2) Physical Science Report No. D-325-09S; (3) One brown envelope with name "Christopher" marked as "C-4" containing the sealed green plastic box with markings "DJ-2" and the heat-sealed transparent plastic sachets confiscated from accused-appellant; (4) Affidavit of Attestation,[20] dated July 3, 2009; (5) the Joint Affidavit executed by the arresting officers; (6) Spot Report No. PS3-070309-54; (7) photographs taken during the arrest and inventory; (8) the request for drug testing of the accused-appellant; and (9) Receipt of Property Seized.

VERSION OF THE DEFENSE

Defense, meanwhile, offered the testimony of accusedappellant Joseph Ventura. He alleged that he was a tricycle driver, separated from his wife who had custody of their two (2) children.[21]

According to accused-appellant, at around midnight of July 3, 2009, while he was sleeping at his home located in 6034 Sitio San Juan, Baclaran, Parañaque City, he was awakened by a loud bang on the door. He was then surprised to see two (2) men inside his house looking for a certain "Abdul" who allegedly entered his house.[22] Accused-appellant informed the men that he was alone in the house and did not know of any person named "Abdul." [23] In response, the men threatened to arrest him if he did not show them where Abdul went.[24] Accused-appellant was subsequently brought to the police headquarters where he was interrogated about Abdul's whereabouts but he continued to deny that he knew any person going by the name of Abdul. The men also demanded that he pay the amount of P30,000.00 in exchange for his freedom but since accused-appellant could not produce the said amount, he was detained after which he underwent inquest proceedings where he learned that he was charged with sale and possession of illegal drugs.[25]

FINDINGS OF THE TRIAL COURT

After weighing the evidence presented before the trial court, it rendered the appealed Decision,[26] dated December 19, 2012, ruling in this wise:

"WHEREFORE, premises considered the court renders judgment as follows:

In Criminal Case No. 09-0739 for Violation of Sec. 11, Art. II, RA 9165, the court finds accused JOSEPH FELIX VENTURA, GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt and is hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of imprisonment of twelve (12) years and one (1) day as minimum to seventeen (17) years and four (4) months as maximum and to pay a fine of Php300,000.00.

In Criminal Case No. 09-0740 for Violation of Sec. 5, Art. II, RA 9165, the court finds accused JOSEPH FELIX VENTURA, GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt and is hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment and to pay a fine of Php500,000.00

It appearing that accused JOSEPH FELIX VENTURA is detained at the Parañaque jail and considering the penalty imposed, the OIC-Branch Clerk of Court is directed to prepare the Mittimus for the immediate transfer of said accused from the Parañaque City Jail to the New Bilibid Prisons, Muntinlupa City.

The specimen (sic) are forfeited in favor of the government and the OIC-Branch Clerk of Court is likewise directed to immediately turn over the same to the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) for proper disposal pursuant to Supreme Court OCA Circular No. 50-2003.

SO ORDERED." [27]

Hence, this appeal.

ASSIGNMENT OF ERRORS

Accused-appellant ascribes the following errors on the part of the trial court:

I.

THE COURT A QUO GRAVELY ERRED IN GIVING FULL WEIGHT AND CREDENCE TO THE PROSECUTION'S EVIDENCE NOTWITHSTANDING THE APPREHENDING TEAM'S FAILURE TO PROVE THE INTEGRITY AND IDENTITY OF THE ALLEGED CONFISCATED SHABU PURSUANT TO SECTION 21 OF REPUBLIC ACT NO. 9165 AND ITS IMPLEMENTING RULES AND REGULATIONS.

II.

THE COURT A QUO GRAVELY ERRED IN DEVIATING FROM THE ESTABLISHED RULE THAT THE PRESUMPTION OF REGULARITY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF OFFICIAL DUTY BY THE POLICE OFFICERS SHOULD NOT BY ITSELF PREVAIL OVER THE PRESUMPTION OF INNOCENCE OF THE ACCUSED APPELLANT.[28]

RULING

According to accused-appellant, the police officers failed to strictly comply with the procedure set forth in Section 21(1) of RA 9165 which provides:

"SEC. 21. Custody and Disposition of Confiscated, Seized, and/or Surrendered Dangerous Drugs, Plant Sources of Dangerous Drugs, Controlled Precursors and Essential Chemicals, Instruments/Paraphernalia and/or Laboratory Equipment. – The PDEA shall take charge and have custody of all dangerous drugs, plant sources of dangerous drugs, controlled precursors and essential chemicals, as well as instruments/paraphernalia and/or laboratory equipment so confiscated seized and/or surrendered, for proper disposition in the following manner:

(1) The apprehending team having initial custody and control of the drugs shall, immediately after seizure and confiscation, physically inventory and photograph the same in the presence of the accused or the persons from whom such items were confiscated and/or seized, or his/her representative or counsel, a representative from the media and the Department of Justice (DOJ), and any elected public official who shall be required to sign the copies of the inventory and be given a copy thereof;

(2) Within twenty-four (24) hours upon confiscation/seizure of dangerous drugs, plant sources of dangerous drugs, controlled precursors and essential chemicals, as well as instruments/paraphernalia and/or laboratory equipment, the same shall be submitted to the PDEA Forensic Laboratory for a qualitative and quantitative examination;

A certification of the forensic laboratory examination results, which shall be done under oath by the forensic laboratory examiner, shall be issued within twenty-four (24) hours after the receipt of the subject item/s: x x x." (Emphasis ours)

It is argued that the witnesses to the inventory were not elected officials but rather, only the executive officer and a barangay tanod. Accused-appellant also contends that the absence of a media person, a DOJ representative and an elected official constitutes inexcusable procedural lapses that would "defeat the purpose of the law in narrowing the window of opportunity for any tampering or planting of evidences (sic) resulting to fabrication of charges." [29]

Accused-appellant relies on the case of *People vs. Magat* [30] where the Supreme Court struck down the

conviction of the accused in the following manner:

"In the case at bar, it is indisputable that the procedures for the custody and disposition of the confiscated dangerous drugs in Section 21 of R.A. No. 9165 were not complied with. PO1 Santos admitted that he marked the two plastic sachets containing white crystalline substance in the police station. He did not mark the seized items immediately after he arrested appellant in the latter's presence. He also did not make an inventory and take a photograph of the confiscated materials in the presence of appellant. Other than the three policemen, there were no other people who participated in the alleged buy-bust operation. There was no representative from the media and the Department of Justice, or any elected public official who participated in the operation and who were supposed to sign an inventory of seized items and be given copies thereof. None of the statutory safeguards were observed.

A review of jurisprudence, even prior to the passage of the R.A. No. 9165, shows that this Court did not hesitate to strike down convictions for failure to follow the proper procedure for the custody of confiscated dangerous drugs. Prior to R.A. No. 9165, the Court applied the procedure required by Dangerous Drugs Board Regulation No. 3, Series of 1979 amending Board Regulation No. 7, Series of 1974." (Emphasis ours)

A more recent case, however, discusses the effect of noncompliance with the procedure in Section 21. In *Valleno vs. People of the Philippines*,^[31] the Supreme Court emphasized:

"In *People v. Concepcion*, this Court ruled that the failure to submit in evidence the required physical inventory of the seized drugs and the photograph, as well as the absence of a member of media or the DOJ, pursuant to Section 21, Article II of Republic Act No. 9165 is not fatal and will not render an accused's arrest illegal or the items seized/confiscated from him inadmissible.

What is of utmost importance is the preservation of the integrity and the evidentiary value of the seized items, as the same would be utilized in the determination of the guilt or innocence of the accused." (Emphasis ours)

This function in buy-bust operations is performed by the chain of custody requirement which ensures that doubts concerning the identity of the evidence are removed.^[32] The term "chain of custody" has been defined in Section 1 (b) of Dangerous Drugs Board Regulation No. 1, Series of 2002, as the duly recorded authorized movements and custody of seized drugs or controlled chemicals or plant sources of dangerous drugs or laboratory equipment of each stage, from the time of seizure/confiscation to receipt in the forensic laboratory for safekeeping to presentation in court for destruction. Such record of movements and custody of seized items shall include the identity and signature of the person who held temporary custody of the seized item, the date and time when such transfer of custody were made in the course of safekeeping and use in court as evidence, and the final disposition.^[33]

To be able to create a first link in the chain of custody, then, what is required is that the marking be made in the presence of the accused and upon immediate confiscation.^[34]

In the case relied upon by accused-appellant, the Supreme Court acquitted therein accused partly on the ground that the items were not marked upon immediate confiscation. The term "immediate confiscation" has no exact definition. Thus, in *People v. Gum-Oyen*,^[35] it was held that the marking of the seized items at the police station and in the presence of the accused was sufficient in showing compliance with the rules on chain of custody. Marking upon immediate confiscation contemplates even marking at the nearest police station or office of the apprehending team.^[36] In this case, after arrest, accused-appellant was directly brought to the barangay hall within the vicinity of the buy-bust scene because the actual place where the arrest occurred was muddy and dark. Hence, this qualifies as marking done immediately after confiscation of the items entered into evidence.

Further, in the *Magat* case, the officers therein did not make any inventory, which is not the case here. The police

officers in this situation made an inventory in the form of the Receipt of Property Seized and entered the same into evidence. The only defect, however, is the lack of the signatures and witnesses required by Section 21. The presence of the barangay officers, though not elected, constitutes substantial compliance with the procedural safeguards set up by the law and the recognition of such compliance is supported by jurisprudence, particularly *Valleno vs. People of the Philippines*.^[37]

Accused-appellant also questions the "sealing and re-sealing" process and argues that failure to make the sealing places a responsibility on the part of the prosecution to present the officer to whom the seized items were turned over to testify that he had taken care that the items were not tampered with or substituted,^[38] relying on the case of *People of the Philippines vs. Elmer Peralta*,^[39] where the Supreme Court held:

"Since the seizing officer usually has to turn over the seized drugs to the desk officer or some superior officer, who would then send a courier to the police crime laboratory with a request that the same be examined to identify the contents, it is imperative for the officer who placed his marking on the plastic container to seal the same, preferably with adhesive tape that usually cannot be removed without leaving a tear on the plastic container. If the drugs were not in a plastic container, the police officer should put it in one and seal the same. In this way the drugs would assuredly reach the laboratory in the same condition it was seized from the accused.

Further, after the laboratory technician has tested and verified the nature of the powder in the container, he should seal it again with a new seal since the police officer's seal had been broken. In this way, if the accused wants to contest the test made, the Court would be assured that what is retested is the same powder seized from the accused."

There is one small but glaring difference, however, between the facts of the instant case and *Peralta*. In the said case, the Supreme Court found that at the onset, there was a failure to prove the time of marking of the drugs allegedly confiscated from *Peralta* as opposed to this situation where it was clearly proven that the marking was done in the barangay hall, falling within the standard of being done "immediately after confiscation," as discussed above.

Further, in *Peralta*, the police made the arrest on July 21, 2002 and the request for laboratory examination was done the next day, July 22, 2002, which gave rise to doubt as to the integrity of the evidence therein. Here, there is no question that accused-appellant was arrested sometime after midnight of July 3, 2009 and the request for laboratory examination was received by the Crime Laboratory a little over an hour later. The receiving stamp on the face of the Memorandum requesting the examination shows that the evidence was submitted at 03:25 in the morning of July 3, 2009 by PO3 Acbang and received by Relos.

Accused-appellant would have this Court believe that the failure to identify the laboratory employee who actually received the specimen from Acbang also casts doubt upon the integrity of the evidence as it results in a break in on the chain of custody. Further, accused-appellant emphasized that there was no mention that Julaton or Acbang actually sealed the seized items.

As discussed earlier, the first link in the chain of custody was formed upon the marking of the evidence immediately upon its confiscation at the barangay hall. This is supported by the photographs taken at the time, the preparation of the Receipt of Property Seized and Spot Report.

The second link is forged upon the delivery of the seized evidence to the PNP Crime Laboratory at 03:25 in the morning on July 3, 2009. Physical Science Report No. D-325-095 shows that the evidence was sealed upon delivery, to wit:

"SPECIMEN SUBMITTED: A – One (1) tape-sealed brown envelope containing one (1) sealed green

transparent plastic box with markings 'DJ-2' and marked as 'A-1' further containing two (2) heat-sealed transparent plastic sachets each having white crystalline substance with the following markings and recorded net weights: A-1-1/DJ = 0.01 gram A-1-2/DJ-1 = 0.01 gram"[40]

The final link is the identification of the evidence by the poseurbuyer when presented to him during trial. The transcript of stenographic notes during Julaton's testimony clearly shows that the heat-sealed bags of shabu were re-sealed by the crime laboratory after the necessary examination was conducted thereby preserving the integrity of the evidence, to wit:

"PROS. ROMA:

Witness identified the small transparent plastic sachet containing white crystalline substance with marking, 'DJ'.

Q:

Mr. witness, do you know who placed this masking tape?

A:

It's probably the crime laboratory who placed that.

x x x

WITNESS:

A:

This is the same item recovered from the accused.

Q:

Why do you say that this is the same white crystalline substance which was recovered from the accused?

A:

Because of the markings, 'DJ-1'.

Q:

Who put the markings, 'DJ-1'?

A:

I, myself, ma'am.

PROS. ROMA:

The small transparent sachet containing white crystalline substance had been previously marked [in] evidence as Exhibit 'C-3'."[41]

Accused-appellant also questions the fact that the envelope containing the evidence was marked with the name "Christopher," suggesting that the evidence might have been mixed up with that of another case.

This was explained by Julaton through his testimony that the name given by the confidential informant was "Christopher Ventura" thus explaining the discrepancy between accused-appellant's name and that written on the envelope. This is further supported by the contents of the Pre-Operation Form executed prior to the buy-bust operation.

WHEREFORE, in view of the foregoing, the Appeal is DENIED. The Decision,[42] dated December 19, 2012, rendered by the Regional Trial Court of Parañaque City, Branch 259 in Criminal Case Nos. 09-0739 and 09-0740, is AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Tijam (Chairperson) and Baltazar-Padilla, JJ., concur.

- [1] See Order,
- [2] Rollo, pp. 58-64
- [3] Records, pp. 1-2
- [4] Records, p. 1
- [5] Records, p. 2
- [6] See Order, dated July 15, 2009, Records, p. 17
- [7] See Pre-Operation Form, dated July 2, 2009, Records, p. 226
- [8] Records, p. 7
- [9] Records, p. 8
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Records, p. 14
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Records, pp. 9-10
- [14] See Booking Sheet, Records, p. 15; See also TSN, October 10, 2011, p. 42.
- [15] Records, p. 12
- [16] Records, p. 13
- [17] Records, p. 13
- [18] See Request for Drug Test Examination, dated July 3, 2009, Records, p. 11
- [19] Records, pp. 5-6
- [20] Records, p. 4
- [21] TSN, November 19, 2012, p. 4

- [22] TSN, November 19, 2012, pp. 5-6
- [23] TSN, November 19, 2012, p. 6
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] TSN, November 19, 2012, p. 7
- [26] Rollo, pp. 58-64
- [27] Rollo, pp. 63-64
- [28] See Brief for the Accused-Appellant, Rollo, p. 33
- [29] See Brief for Accused-Appellant, Rollo, p. 36
- [30] G.R. No. 179939, September 29, 2008
- [31] G.R. No. 192050, January 9, 2013
- [32] People of the Philippines vs. Delos Reyes, G.R. No. 181039, January 31, 2011
- [33] Section 1, Dangerous Drugs Board Regulation No. 1, Series of 2002
- [34] People vs. Resurreccion, G.R. No. 186380, October 12, 2009
- [35] G.R. No. 182231, April 16, 2009
- [36] People vs. Resurreccion, G.R. No. 186380, October 12, 2009
- [37] G.R. No. 192050, January 9, 2013
- [38] See Brief for Accused-Appellant, Rollo, p. 40
- [39] G.R. no. 173472, February 26, 2010
- [40] Records, p. 13
- [41] TSN, October 10, 2011, pp. 21-22
- [42] Rollo, pp. 58-64

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