

NEWS

They Were Go-To Dealers for College Students. Now They're Headed to Prison.

A trial in federal court last week stemming from the overdose of a 23-year-old Raleigh man exposed the inner workings of a drug-dealing duo and their college-student clients.

by **Charlotte Kramon**

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Credit: Photo illustration by Taylor Le for The Assembly

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The weekend of March 4, 2023, was a big one in the Triangle.

Big for thousands of students and alums because longtime basketball rivals Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were facing off. Big for crowded restaurants and bars that had the Saturday night game in UNC's Dean Dome on their wide-screen TVs.

And big for Cye Frasier and his girlfriend, Carlisa Allen, who expected to bring in \$10,000 in drug sales that weekend from their primary customer base: college students.

That weekend was the first time Josh Zinner, a former UNC-Wilmington student from Raleigh, purchased directly from Frasier and Allen, according to testimony last week in federal court. His roommate, a former UNC-Chapel Hill student and Phi Gamma Delta member, referred him to Frasier.

Due to his day job cutting hair, students knew Frasier as “The Barber.” But he was in Las Vegas that weekend, so he sent Allen to make deliveries—something she did often.

On one of her runs, she pulled up at a house in a neighborhood just east of downtown Durham to make a delivery to Zinner, 23, who was in a string-lit backyard for a watch party.

Zinner had requested two grams of cocaine from Frasier for \$168, Detective Eddie Camacho of the Raleigh Police Department testified. With her partner out of town on a busy weekend, Allen was hustling.

Four days later, on March 8, Frasier left Allen's Chapel Hill apartment to take more cocaine to Zinner, this time at his home in Raleigh. Zinner died shortly after of **cocaine and fentanyl toxicity**.

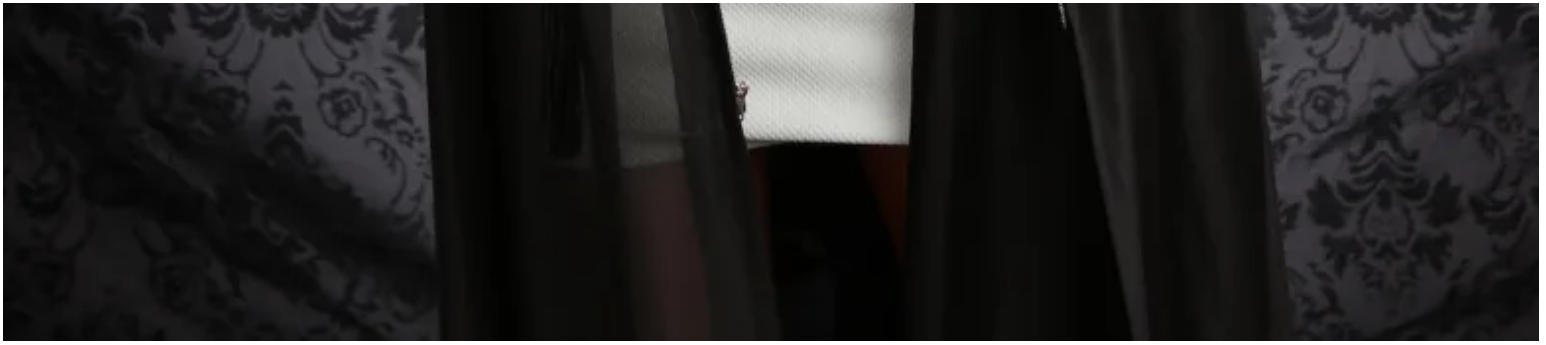
After a nearly week-long federal trial in Greensboro, Allen, 46, was found guilty on November 17 of five charges, including conspiracy to distribute cocaine and fentanyl, distribution while in possession of a firearm, and distribution resulting in Zinner's death. When she is sentenced in February, she faces a prison term of 25 years to life. Several media outlets **reported** Allen's conviction after the U.S. attorney's office released **a statement** Friday.

Allen did not testify and declined to be interviewed by *The Assembly* before the trial.

Frasier, 44, **pled guilty** to the same charges earlier last month, except the firearm charge was dismissed as a part of a plea deal. Prosecutors recommended he spend up to 25 years in prison. He will be sentenced in January.

The Assembly attended Allen's entire trial, which provided an unusual glimpse into a shadowy world and showed in detail how college students and young adults buy and consume drugs, sometimes with fatal results.





Elizabeth Grace Burton, a UNC student who died of a drug overdose in March. (Photo courtesy of the Burton family)

Among those sitting in the courtroom were the mother and uncle of Elizabeth Grace Burton of Charlotte, a 19-year-old UNC student **who died at Duke** in March after using cocaine she purchased from Frasier. Neither Frasier nor Allen have been charged in Burton's death, to the dismay of Lisa and James Burton.

James Burton said the family was pleased with the verdict. "Our hearts go out to the Zinner family, another family that suffered great loss at the hands of this collegiate drug cartel," he wrote in a text.

But he wanted prosecutors to be more aggressive in bringing charges. "The only way to curtail continued drug deaths on our college campuses is to prosecute all levels of operations including the campus level student-dealers who connect other students and resale from community dealers," he wrote.

Cliff Zinner, Josh's father, said in an interview: "It felt like honoring Josh and vindication to have her convicted. But it doesn't bring my son back."

He added in a text that the family has gotten involved with organizations that raise awareness about fentanyl. His son's decision to use cocaine "should not have ended in his death," he wrote.

The Business Model

From January 2021 to March 2023, a blue Toyota Rav4 would occasionally park in the middle of UNC-Chapel Hill's Fraternity Court, several students said in their trial testimony. Prospective buyers would shuffle in and out of the back seat. *The Assembly* is not naming the students and former students who testified but were not charged with a crime.

The car belonged to Allen, and either she or Frasier would be seated up front; Frasier didn't have his own car. Frasier is married to another woman, who did not testify during the trial.

Sometimes both Allen and Frasier were present during a deal. One of them would pull small square Ziploc bags of cocaine from the center console, and the students would be on their way.



The entrance to Fraternity Court, where UNC students sometimes bought drugs from Allen and Frasier, according to court testimony. (Photo by Kate Sheppard)

The car could also be found at Pantana Bob's on West Rosemary Street. Or on Duke's campus. Or at their customers' homes. Or at the Lyon's Den barber shop in Durham, where Frasier worked.

"It's a job, a fuckin' business, legal or not," Frasier once texted Allen. They usually charged around \$80 a gram, but the price would fluctuate. Each small bag had half a gram of cocaine and cost \$40 each, a former UNC student testified.

Toward the later days of their operation, Allen made more deliveries than Frasier, former customers testified. They always made their deal through Frasier, but he would sometimes tell them he was sending “his girl” to deliver the drugs.

Sometimes customers paid Frasier. Sometimes they paid Allen. Venmo, Cashapp, Square Cash, cash—the duo accepted it all.

On February 23, a UNC student working under the direction of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration texted Frasier and asked for 10 grams of cocaine. In bursts of short texts, Frasier let the student know he could come immediately and would charge him \$800:

“Wya” [“Where you at”]

“I can come now”

“800”

The student said he had cash. “My guy,” Frasier responded. He said he would send his girl instead and promised to throw in an extra bag or two. The student wore a recording device and captured Allen on the phone with Frasier in front of Pantana Bob’s.

9:04



◀ Search




Dream Chaser



Dream Chaser

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51 Friends

Pay or Request

Cye Frasier's Venmo account, one of several forms of payment he accepted from students.

Frasier and Allen sold drugs at all hours. Early in the morning on March 9, Grace Burton connected with Duke student Patrick Rowland. The two had met on Tinder several weeks earlier and met in person for the first time after midnight. Rowland picked Burton up at UNC and brought her to Duke.

At around 4 a.m., she decided she wanted to do cocaine and called a dealer. He didn't answer, so she called Allen, Rowland testified. She didn't answer, so she called Frasier. He answered her second call.

Rowland testified that he had bought cocaine from Frasier three times, but he never felt the way he did after he snorted it that morning. It started with an intense head rush and dizziness. He then lost control over his body. He spent the next 19 hours vomiting.

But Burton lost consciousness. An autopsy later found fentanyl, which can be deadly, in her system. As DEA agent Stephen Razik testified, two lines of cocaine from the same bag can have different concentrations of fentanyl.

Rowland called Frasier, and Frasier carried Burton's unresponsive body to Rowland's West Campus dorm room. Another student called paramedics an hour later.

The student said he heard Rowland tell paramedics they used cocaine, but it is unknown whether Narcan, which can reverse the effects of fentanyl, was administered. She was pronounced dead two days later.

Rowland, 22, pleaded guilty to using a cell phone to facilitate the distribution of cocaine and marijuana. But he was not charged in connection to Burton's death.



Burton was found unresponsive in a dorm room in Duke's Kilgo Quad. (Photo by Kate Sheppard)

The Texts

The government analyzed 22,000 pages of texts between Allen and Frasier. They included photos Allen took of cocaine bags on digital scales with numbers from 25 grams to over 60 grams, and discussions of the backpack Frasier carried just before his March 15 arrest. Frasier would often ask Allen where a certain substance was, and she would respond with texts such as “in bookbag.”

The two texted about a number of substances, including fentanyl, powder cocaine, crack cocaine, and marijuana.

Officers calculated how many times certain words appeared in their texts. “DK” appeared 107 times and “DKE” appeared 56 times—both references to Delta Kappa Epsilon, officers said. That fraternity has a large, white-columned brick house at the corner of Cameron and South Columbia streets in Chapel Hill. Members of the fraternity declined to comment for this article.



The Delta Kappa Epsilon House in Chapel Hill, which appears regularly in text exchanges between Allen and Frasier. (Photo by Kate Sheppard)

“Frat” appeared 192 times, “Duke” 40, “Venmo” 209, “coke” 27 times, and “fent”—shorthand for fentanyl—12.

“Did I leave that fent over there? The little rock,” Frasier once asked Allen.

“Hey I need 3.5 of fent,” he texted her another time.

Dealers often carry a lot of value, both in cash and product, so they often carry firearms as well. Allen owned at least two guns, one she called purple. “Purple” appeared 41 times, and “gun” appeared 49.

Perhaps the most jarring piece of evidence presented in the trial was a note in Allen’s phone. Prosecutors said it described the amount of fentanyl one can add to cocaine to increase its quantity and quality.

One gram of cocaine usually costs \$70 to \$100. One gram of fentanyl costs \$50 to \$70, sometimes less.

A note in her Notes app included instructions for how to dilute cocaine: “If say good add 5 more g cut if weak add raw ... 28 raw can add 14 cut.” Dealers mix raw material such as cocaine with various substances referred to as “cut” to increase their profit. In this case, Razik said “raw” likely referred to cocaine and “cut” likely referred to fentanyl, which could make the cocaine hit harder.

Razik described the note as a formula for making as much money as possible.

The prosecution emphasized the last line of Allen’s note: “Wear mask and gloves while working.” The note, they said, showed that Allen knew fentanyl is deadly, even in small amounts.

Big Brother

Josh Zinner graduated from Broughton High School in Raleigh and joined Kappa Alpha fraternity at UNCW, but did not graduate. His mother had died in December 2017, right before he enrolled, and he struggled with depression, alcohol abuse, and a gambling addiction that led him to rehab, his father told *The Assembly*.

Still, Zinner remained the kind of guy who could strike up an easy conversation with anyone. He was the “cousin everyone loved,” his 16-year-old sister, Molly Zinner, said in an interview.

After rehab, Zinner lived with two longtime friends in Raleigh, where he rode his bike to work at Oakwood’s Pizza Box and played pickleball with his father several times a week.

Molly called him her “best friend.” He often biked to her high school to bring her lunch, even when she didn’t ask him to.



Joshua Zinner, who died of a drug overdose in March. (Photo courtesy of the Zinner family)

The last time he responded to Molly's text was on March 4. She was at an NLE Choppa concert, a rapper she barely knew but remembered her brother liked. He asked if she was having fun. She told him she touched the rapper's hand.

Zinner responded with a meme that said, "I'm proud of you."

"Lmk if you need anything queen," he added. His contact in her phone says "Joshy."

Their last call was a quick one on March 7. Josh had been sick for several days and canceled their plans.

At 3:18 p.m. on March 8, Frasier left Allen's Chapel Hill apartment to deliver cocaine to Zinner, according to Camacho of the Raleigh Police Department. Zinner paid \$160 in cash.

At around 4 p.m., Zinner arrived at Oakwood's Pizza Box. His boss, Amanda Rose Cosentino, testified that she was alarmed at the sight of Zinner: he was gray and sweaty. She said she had never seen someone look so sickly.

Minutes later, Zinner dashed to the bathroom and threw up. He told his boss it must have been the antibiotic he took. Cosentino sent him home. As he walked home, Zinner threw up several times.

At around 6 p.m., he texted his girlfriend he wasn't feeling well. At 8 p.m., she called him and told him to go outside. She left a care package at his door that included leftover amoxicillin she had been prescribed for a sinus infection the previous month.

That evening, Zinner came downstairs wearing a mask—he didn't want to spread anything to his roommates, although the COVID test he took later came out negative.

An investigation later found that Zinner had made two internet searches that night: "relationship between cocaine use and taking antibiotics" and "can you do coke on antibiotics."

Zinner sent his last text at 10:16 that night. Two days later, one of Zinner's roommates found him dead.

His body was rigid and purple, a paramedic who found him in his bed testified. He likely had been dead for at least eight hours, possibly longer. A yellow vape and three small Ziploc bags were scattered around him. Two were empty, and the third held .58 grams of cocaine.

There was a grinder for marijuana, two packs of rolling paper, an empty pack of cigarillos, and six grams of weed. There was also a bottle of Trazodone, a sedative and antidepressant prescribed to Zinner, and his girlfriend's amoxicillin, neither of which authorities took into custody.

There was no autopsy, Dr. Nabila Haikal from the state Office of the Medical Examiner in Raleigh testified. Due to the backlog of autopsies since the pandemic, the office declares an illicit drug as the cause of death if any amount is found in a screening and there are no other findings of "foul play."

During the trial, Allen's lawyer, George E. Crump III of Rockingham, took issue with the lack of an autopsy, as well as the fact that Zinner's Trazodone and amoxicillin bottles were not taken

and tested. Such mistakes were “inexcusable,” he said. (Crump appeared to have trouble hearing at times during the trial. “I didn’t pick up on everything that was said in this case,” he said at the start of his closing arguments.)

A urine screen showed Zinner’s system had 11 nanograms of fentanyl per liter. The DEA **says as little as** two nanograms can be fatal.

‘A Mobile Drug Store’

The Lyon’s Den barbershop, which has since closed, had been on law enforcement’s radar for several years as a hub of criminal activity.

Federal charges were expected but had not been issued. After Zinner and Burton’s deaths, the DEA task force officers were asked to speed up Frasier’s arrest. At around 4:45 p.m. on March 15, Frasier exited the Lyon’s Den in a red, white, and blue hoodie, red baseball hat, and military green pants, police body camera footage revealed. He had his backpack with him, too.

Allen pulled into the driveway in her blue Toyota Rav4. Frasier got in the car, but then immediately stepped out and put his hands up after tossing the bag toward Allen. Durham police pointed their guns and ordered him to the ground. They ordered Allen to stay in the front seat as officers handcuffed her.

Allen’s 15-year-old son was wide-eyed in the backseat of the car but mostly composed as he held onto the seat in front of him. As the footage played out in the courtroom monitors, Allen began to cry.

Officers found a Glock .45 caliber handgun below Allen’s seat with a loaded magazine. In the middle console they found cash, pills, a scale, and small baggies. Inside Frasier’s backpack were pink pills, weed, coke, a scale, and a stack of cash. Allen’s purse contained pills, a cutting agent, ammunition, and a small pouch with plastic bags of coke and a straw.



An undated photo of fentanyl pills from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. (DEA via AP)

A forensic chemist for the DEA testified that the drug analysis found that the pink pills were oxycodone, and others were fentanyl and PTHIT, a cutting agent.

Prosecutor Michael DeFranco said Frasier's backpack was "essentially a mobile drug store" and told jurors during his closing arguments that Allen's Blue Rav4 was like "the ice cream truck."

The jurors spent Thursday afternoon and Friday morning deliberating. They returned with a verdict at around 12:15 p.m. on November 17.

Lisa Burton's eyes squeezed shut. Allen stared at the floor.

Guilty on the first count—conspiracy to distribute cocaine and a substance containing fentanyl.

Burton smiled with relief.

On the question of Josh Zinner's death, guilty. Counts three, four, and five, also guilty.

Allen's head fell into her hands as she trembled and cried. She whispered to her attorney. Her family remained stoic, and one of them shook his head. Judge William L. Osteen Jr. set her sentencing date for February 13, 2024, and reminded Allen that it was a mandatory detention case.

Suddenly, Allen burst upward. In between sobs, she begged Osteen to let her remain free until sentencing so she could find somewhere for her two kids to go. If she were detained, they'd go into government custody, she cried.

"Please," she whimpered. "Please."

Osteen said again that it was not a case where that would be allowed.

"Sir, please, I understand that, I'm just asking if I can please get them taken care of," she begged. "I understand I have to come back."

Allen's mother, who was seated behind her, also spoke up. "She has nobody here," she said.

"This is going to sound harsh," Osteen said. "Ms. Allen is alive and her children are alive." But, he said, the Burtons and the Zinners have lost a child.

"Sir, Judge Osteen, please," she pleaded. "I just need to get them situated!"

Uniformed officers approached her with handcuffs. Her sobs and screams echoed through the courtroom as she was led away.

Charlotte Kramon, a Duke University senior from Los Angeles, worked for the Los Angeles Times last summer and reports for The Ninth Street Journal. Her email is charlotte.kramon@duke.edu.

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