

## DEGREES OF JUSTICE



ED SUBA JR./Akron Beacon Journal photos

Marco Sommerville met Charles Plinton at 2003 graduation ceremonies at Lincoln University near Philadelphia, where his daughter Margo (right) was a classmate of Plinton's. When the Akron City Council president learned that Plinton was headed to Akron on a full scholarship for graduate study, he told him to call if he ever needed anything. Months later, Sommerville asked his personal attorney to assist Plinton when he was arrested on drug charges in 2004.

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It is alma mater to Justice Thurgood Marshall and Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes.

At Lincoln, they called Plinton "Good-and-Plenty," like the candy, a play on his last name.

"Here comes Good-and-Plenty," his guidance counselor would say. "What's up, Good-and-Plenty?"

He worked for her as a peer adviser and when she told him what he needed to do to get into graduate school, he knuckled down and did the work. That's when she knew he was serious about his future.

His parents hadn't been together since he was a small child and they had different ideas about his postgraduate future. His dad, who shared his name, wanted him to go into business right away. His mother wanted him to get his master's degree first.

They both worried about him going to Ohio, so far from home. They thought he was naive and too trusting of people.

Plinton wouldn't be a complete stranger in Akron, however.

He met Marco Sommerville, the Akron City Council president, at Lincoln's graduation ceremony. Sommerville's daughter was one of Plinton's classmates.

Plinton was headed to the University of Akron in the fall on a full-ride scholarship for a master's in public administration.

He wanted to be a cop, maybe a federal agent.

Sommerville told Plinton that Akron was a good town - and to call if he ever needed anything.

## Cut off from job, barred from campus

Plinton was almost finished with his second semester at UA when he was arrested.

He was on his way to class in the downtown Polsky building when two campus police officers stopped in the hallway and handcuffed him while his department head and fellow students watched.

Plinton thought maybe he had unpaid speeding tickets. His father had always warned him about speeding: Why give the police a reason to stop a young black man?

He was indicted on felony drug trafficking charges of selling marijuana twice to a confidential informant and spent almost three days in the Summit County Jail before he was released on bond.

The university moved quickly to sever ties. They suspended Plinton from all classes, even though all he had left to do was take finals.

They canceled the stipend from his research job.

They kicked him out of the dorm. They threatened to arrest him for trespassing if he set foot on campus without permission.

And if anyone didn't see the arrest or hear about it, they could read it on the front page of the student newspaper.

All this before he'd even appeared before a magistrate to plead not guilty.

## Plinton: You've got the wrong guy

While in jail, he got a visit from the lead detective, who told him he saw the drug buy. But if he were willing to work for the police as a confidential informant himself, he might get some

consideration from the prosecutor.

The detective, who worked for the UA police and on the Summit County Drug Unit, a multi-agency task force, had done hundreds of cases like this and it was common to leverage street-level drug dealers to get to bigger fish.

Plinton said he'd wear a wire to help catch the real drug dealer, but this was a case of mistaken identity. They had the wrong guy.

Truly innocent people don't offer to help the police, the detective said.

Plinton withdrew his offer. After his release, he called his old criminology professor at Lincoln University, Terrance Johnson, who had helped get him into the Akron graduate program.

Johnson called Sommerville. Sommerville's take was: This kid threw away his full-ride scholarship on drugs. Everybody busted for drugs says the cops got the wrong guy.

"I don't know if he did it or not, but he's my student," Johnson said.

The professor was right, Sommerville agreed. Let's get him a lawyer and see how it unfolds.

He called his personal attorney, Robert Meeker, and asked him to look into it.

## Informant points finger at Plinton

The multi-agency task force gave their confidential informant the ironic nickname of "Hulk" because he was a scrawny 35-year-old felon. Hulk's curriculum vitae included theft, burglary, unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, DUI, domestic violence and possession of drug paraphernalia.

The university gave Hulk a fake schedule of classes and a dorm room next door to Plinton's in Wallaby Hall.

The task force paid Hulk \$50 every time he found a student willing to sell him drugs.

Hulk said Plinton sold him pot in the parking lot outside the dorm twice - on March 3 and on March 11 - with task force officers observing from a distance. They didn't arrest him either time because they thought Hulk could lead them to a bigger bust with powdered or crack cocaine.

But Hulk couldn't land the big deal and now the task force was stuck with just these two pot buys for less than \$100 total. March was almost over and the task force didn't know the name of

their "target" student yet.

That's when Hulk decided to do some crime-solving on his own and get that name. While the lead detective was on vacation, Hulk went to the dorm's building manager and asked to see a security video of the hallway where he and Plinton lived. It showed Plinton leaving his room shortly before the March 11 deal in the parking lot.

The building manager told him the guy he was looking at was Charles Plinton. Hulk testified later that he kept the tape in his dorm room for four or five days and then he turned it over to the police, who looked at it and agreed that this was the guy who was selling drugs to Hulk in the parking lot. It was an important piece of evidence.

The police had no videotape of the actual drug deals, which Hulk arranged on the phone himself without police surveillance. The audio recording from Hulk's microphone during the deals was of poor quality. Neither the drug dealer's cell phone nor the cars he drove away in afterward were connected to Plinton.

It turns out the video Hulk obtained actually helped the defense, which didn't dispute that it was Plinton on the tape. It simply showed a student leaving his room, one whose description didn't match that of the drug seller.

Plinton, at 5-feet-11-inches tall and weighing 160 pounds, had light brown skin, full eyebrows and high cheekbones.

The lead detective wrote in his report that the "target" stood taller than 6 feet and weighed about 200 pounds.

He described the drug-seller's clothes as a blue winter jacket with fur trim and blue jeans.

The dorm video Hulk got from security that day showed Plinton in a black jacket with no fur trim and dark pants.

The detective explained later that when he wrote blue, he meant "dark blue, midnight blue."

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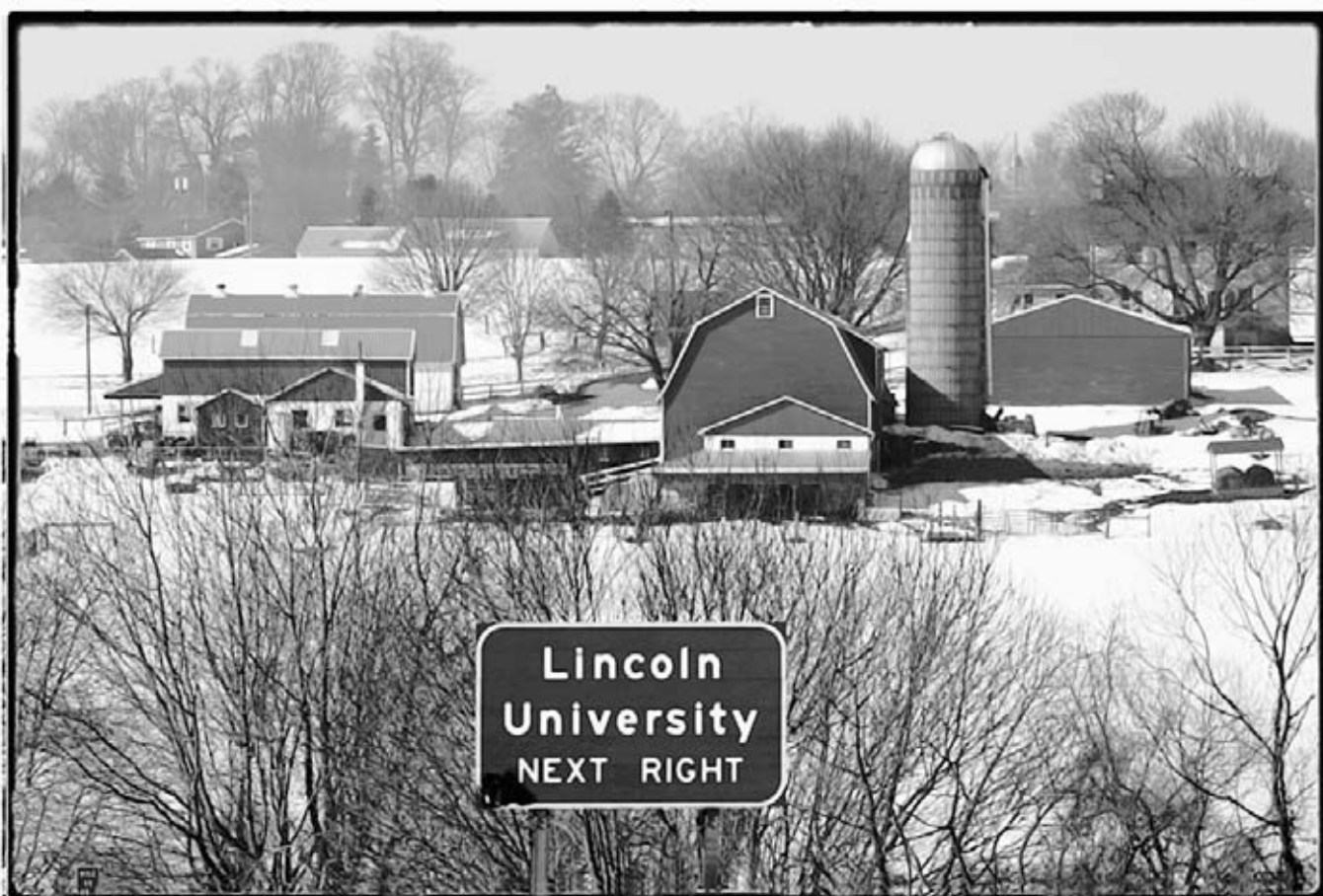
"This thing went wrong after he was vindicated at court. It went wrong at the university level."

Professor Terrance Johnson of Lincoln University



"You literally destroyed this man's life and all you want to say is, well, you know, we have to protect others? But who's protecting him? He was a student, too."

Cryshanna Jackson, a doctoral student who worked with Charles Plinton when they were both graduate students at the University of Akron



A sign in eastern Pennsylvania directs drivers to the university from which Charles Plinton earned his undergraduate degree, and where he was a classmate of Marco Sommerville's daughter, Margo, both of Akron. Criminology professor Terrance Johnson, at Lincoln University, helped Plinton get into a graduate program at the University of Akron.