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No. 3--09--0889

Order filed May 3, 2011

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IN THE  
APPELLATE COURT OF ILLINOIS  
THIRD DISTRICT

A.D., 2011

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE	)	Appeal from the Circuit Court
OF ILLINOIS,	)	of the 14th Judicial Circuit,
	)	Whiteside County, Illinois,
Plaintiff-Appellee,	)	
	)	Nos. 07--CF--524 and
v.	)	07--TR--12741
	)	
CHRISTINE Y. EDWARDS,	)	Honorable
	)	John L. Hauptman,
Defendant-Appellant.	)	Judge, Presiding.

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JUSTICE LYTTON delivered the judgment of the court.  
Justices O'Brien and Wright concurred in the judgment.

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**ORDER**

*Held:* Trial court's error in admitting officer's irrelevant testimony that defendant had two outstanding arrest warrants was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt where the evidence was overwhelming that defendant was guilty of driving while license suspended and obstructing justice.

Defendant Christine Y. Edwards was convicted of driving while license suspended (625 ILCS 5/6--303(a) (West 2006)) and obstructing justice (720 ILCS 5/31--4(a) (West 2006)). On appeal,

she claims that the trial court abused its discretion in admitting testimony of her two outstanding arrest warrants. We affirm.

In opening arguments, the prosecutor told the jury that the evidence would show that Sterling police officer Amy Meyer ran the registration for a Dodge truck. The report she received contained information that the owner of the truck had a suspended driver's license and two arrest warrants for undisclosed charges. Defense counsel objected to the State's reference to the arrest warrants, which the trial judge overruled.

At trial, Officer Meyer testified that around 7 a.m. on November 20, 2007, she was on patrol near Jefferson School. A green Dodge truck with temporary registration plates pulled into the student drop off area. As the truck drove away, Meyer ran the registration number through her computer and discovered that the registered owner, Christine Y. Edwards, had a suspended Illinois driver's license and two outstanding arrest warrants. Meyer followed the truck to Challand Middle School where the driver dropped off another child. As the driver left the area, Meyer initiated a stop.

Meyer approached the truck and asked the driver for her license. The driver said she left her purse at home and told Meyer that her name was Valerie "Carillo" spelled with one "r", and that her birth date was April 24, 1973. Meyer ran the name and birth date and was unable to find that name on file.

Meyer returned to the vehicle and asked defendant to spell her last name again. This time, defendant spelled "Carrillo" with two "r"s. Meyer ran the name again and was unable to retrieve a record with that spelling.

Meyer returned to the truck a third time. In response to further questions, defendant removed a wallet containing an Illinois driver's license from the console and said "okay, I'm not who I say I am." The name on the license she handed to Meyer was "Christine Y. Edwards." The defendant's picture was on the license, and the identifying information matched the information on the arrest warrants. Officer Dennis Swinton testified that he was with Meyer when she approached the truck for the third time and he heard defendant say that she had provided false identification.

The State introduced a certified document from the Secretary of State showing that defendant's driver's license was suspended on November 20, 2007. Defense counsel objected, claiming that defendant never received notification of the suspension. The trial court denied the objection.

Defendant testified that she remembered giving Officer Meyer the false name of "Valerie Carillo," as well as the false date of birth of April 24, 1973. She stated that she gave Meyer the false information because she wanted to stay out of trouble. She admitted that, prior to November 20, 2007, she received notice from the Secretary of State that her license would be suspended on a

certain date. She could not recall the exact date listed. She also testified that the letter said her license would be suspended only if she was unable to provide proof of insurance. She believed her insurance company was responsible for sending in the proper information. She never received anything from the Secretary of State that said her license was "definitely" suspended.

The jury found defendant guilty of both charges. The trial court sentenced her to 30 months of probation and 60 days in jail for obstructing justice and imposed a \$100 fine for driving while license revoked.

#### ANALYSIS

Defendant argues that the trial court erred in allowing the State to introduce irrelevant and prejudicial evidence regarding her two outstanding arrest warrants.

Generally, an officer may recount the steps taken in an investigation and describe the events leading up to the defendant's arrest where such testimony is necessary and important to explain the State's case. *People v. Simms*, 143 Ill. 2d 154 (1991). However, any evidence that suggests or implies that the defendant has engaged in prior criminal activity is inadmissible if it is used merely to establish the defendant's propensity to commit a crime. *People v. Kliner*, 185 Ill. 2d 81 (1998). When evidence of other crimes is presented as part of the steps in the investigation of a crime and the events leading up to it, the evidence must also

be relevant to specifically connect defendant with the crimes for which he is being tried. *People v. Lewis*, 165 Ill. 2d 305 (1995).

Here, the evidence that defendant had two outstanding arrest warrants was unnecessary to explain the course of the officer's investigation. Meyer testified that she checked the identification on the suspended driver's license report and the two arrest warrants and noticed that both were similar to the driver of the truck she stopped. Thus, her testimony that she checked the information on the arrest warrants was not needed to show the steps leading up to defendant's arrest. An explanation for the officer's conduct was already provided when Meyer told the jury that she had information that the vehicle's owner had a suspended license.

Moreover, evidence of the outstanding arrest warrants was irrelevant to prove defendant committed the crimes as charged. While the exception to the prohibition of the use of other crimes evidence may have justified Meyer's testimony that defendant had a suspended driver's license, it does not justify the vague and overbroad disclosure that defendant was also wanted for failing to appear on other charges. Under the circumstances, such evidence had little probative value on the issue of defendant's guilt and was highly prejudicial. Accordingly, we find that the admission of the outstanding arrest warrants was error. See *People v. Pittman*, 126 Ill. App. 3d 586 (1984).

Nevertheless, we have consistently held that the erroneous

introduction of other crimes evidence by the defendant does not constitute grounds for reversal if the evidence as a whole shows that the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. See *People v. Nieves*, 193 Ill. 2d 513, 530 (2000); *Pittman*, 126 Ill. App. 3d at 590. In this case, the evidence presented at trial included Meyer's testimony that she saw defendant driving a Dodge truck on November 20, 2007; a certified abstract showing defendant's license was suspended; and defendant's admission that she provided false information to the officers. This evidence is more than sufficient to prove defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of driving while license revoked and obstructing justice. We therefore find that the error committed by the admission of the prosecutor's opening statement and the officer's testimony was harmless.

#### CONCLUSION

The judgment of the circuit court of Whiteside County is affirmed.

Affirmed.