

U.S.

Trial Over Suicide and Texting Lays Bare Pain of 2 Teenagers

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE and JESS BIDGOOD JUNE 12, 2017

TAUNTON, Mass. — Michelle Carter is a haunting presence in court, looking on darkly as her troubled past — with eating disorders, deep social insecurities and talk of killing herself — is laid bare in her trial, for all the world to see. Most of the time, she appears to be on the verge of tears.

Sitting in court, she has said nothing publicly. But her own words, in the form of thousands of text messages, make up the bulk of the evidence both for and against her in an unusual trial that began last Tuesday and could come to an end this week.

Ms. Carter, 20, is being tried on a charge of involuntary manslaughter in the death of Conrad Roy III, whom she called her boyfriend. He was 18 in July 2014 when he killed himself with carbon monoxide as he sat alone in his truck in a Kmart parking lot.

Ms. Carter, then 17, was about an hour away at the time. But she had urged him, through screen after screen of texts, to kill himself.

As a judge considers whether Ms. Carter is legally responsible for Mr. Roy's

death, the pain and dependency of two desperately unhappy teenagers have spilled into the courtroom here in excruciating detail. Both had a history of emotional instability and, in his case, four failed suicide attempts. The copious texts between the two provide a stark window into their mind-sets, and the case will probably turn on the question of whether one person's words can cause the suicide of another.

Prosecutors contend that Ms. Carter is as responsible for the death as if she had been sitting in the truck with Mr. Roy. They say she wielded enormous power over him: They contend that even as he was being sickened by the fumes and got out of his truck, she ordered him back in during a phone call. He returned to the truck.

But Ms. Carter's lawyers say it was Mr. Roy who held sway over her. They say that for many months, she tried to talk him into getting treatment. But, the lawyers say, two weeks before he died, Ms. Carter underwent a transformation set off by antidepressants and came to believe the best way to help him was to encourage him to carry out his plan to kill himself.

Closing arguments could come on Tuesday, with a decision by the judge before the end of the week. (Ms. Carter waived her right to a jury trial.) If found guilty, she faces up to 20 years in prison.

The two teenagers met through their families in 2012 when they were vacationing in Florida. It turned out they lived less than an hour apart in Massachusetts. Once they returned home, though, they rarely saw each other in person, instead developing an intense relationship that played out in texts and Facebook messages.

According to court documents and testimony, Mr. Roy had been physically and verbally abused at home and ended up, at least once, in an emergency room. When his parents divorced, Mr. Roy was despondent, and in October 2012 he tried to kill himself.

In videos played in court, Mr. Roy, speaking into his computer, described his despair. He called himself a "minuscule little particle on the face of this earth" and

“no-good trash.” At another point, he called himself “an abortion” and said his life was “a joke.”

Ms. Carter often showed the world a more positive aspect, according to testimony by Dr. Peter R. Breggin, a psychiatrist and expert in psychopharmacology who testified for the defense and said he had interviewed people who knew Ms. Carter and reviewed her texts, posts and medical records. She was constantly trying to help people, he said.

But Dr. Breggin, who once seemed to suggest on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” that some patients should not take their prescribed psychiatric medication, said Ms. Carter was “intoxicated” by antidepressants, which she first started taking at 14, causing her to become unhinged at times and to show intense anxiety, irritability and psychoses.

Her lawyers said she had a host of other “frailties,” including a severe eating disorder. In her texts, she talked about being distraught over her body image and said she cut herself when she was anxious. At one point, she told a friend that she, too, had nearly attempted suicide. She also expressed confusion about her sexuality and lamented having no friends. All the while, she craved the attention of certain popular girls at school and appeared excessively grateful when they were nice to her.

It was this yearning for attention that prosecutors said drove Ms. Carter to push Mr. Roy to kill himself. His death, they said, would allow her to play the role of the “grieving girlfriend” and become the focus of sympathy.

Ms. Carter’s voluminous correspondences showed she texted freely about her own problems and Mr. Roy’s. In June 2014, she wrote to Samantha Boardman, one of the girls she admired:

“Hes suicidal and has severe depression and social anxiety which is the bad part but I’m the only one he has and he needs me. I mean it’s not helping that I’m kinda going thru my own stuff but if I leave him he will probably kill himself and it would be all my fault. I’m keeping him alive basically.”

Ms. Carter had been through a suicide attempt with Mr. Roy before. In October 2012, she was shocked when he told her on Facebook he was planning to kill himself. “You have so much to live for please don’t,” she told him.

When he raised the subject again in June 2014, she continued to encourage him to seek help.

“Have you thought about getting professional help?” she wrote. “I think it will really help you.”

But by early July 2014, Ms. Carter’s attitude changed. She abruptly turned her attention to helping Mr. Roy end his misery. Prosecutors said she was craving her friends’ attention; Dr. Breggin said it was a “transformation” brought about by her switch from Prozac to Celexa months earlier.

“She was enmeshed in a delusional system,” Dr. Breggin said. “She’s thinking it’s a good thing to help him die.”

She also gave him elaborate instructions on how to do it. Most of the prosecution’s case against Ms. Carter is built on texts she sent in the two weeks before his death on July 12. In those, she counseled Mr. Roy to overcome his doubts. She told him that he was “strong” enough to commit suicide and that his parents would manage:

“I think your parents know you’re in a really bad place. I’m not saying they want you to do it but I honestly feel like they can accept it.” She added, “Everyone will be sad for a while but they will get over it and move on.”

When technical and logistical issues arose, Ms. Carter provided direction and advice. If the gas did not work, she noted at one point, he had other options:

“Hang yourself, jump off a building, stab yourself idk there’s a lot of ways.”

Oddly, she began texting her classmates on July 10 that he was missing, even though he was not; in fact she was texting with him at the time and instructing him on how to fix the generator that he wanted to use in his suicide. He would not kill himself for two more days, after more exchanges in which Ms. Carter declared, more than once, “You just have to do it.”

Mr. Roy sent his last text to Ms. Carter at 6:25 p.m. on July 12: “Okay, I’m almost there.”

They spoke by phone then. It is not known what was said, but she later texted Ms. Boardman that he got out of the truck because the carbon monoxide was working “and he got scared.” She “told him to get back in.”

Shortly thereafter, Ms. Carter texted Mr. Roy’s mother asking where he was, not mentioning the call she had just had with him while he was killing himself.

He was found dead the next day.

A short time later, she arranged a fund-raising baseball tournament in Mr. Roy’s name — in her hometown, Plainville, not his — and presented herself as an anti-suicide advocate.

“Even though I could not save my boyfriend’s life,” she wrote on Facebook, “I want to put myself out there to try to save as many other lives as possible.”

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