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Stephanie Barnes Facing 8 Years in Jail After Being Found Guilty on All Counts

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Ernice Gilbert **December 23, 2021**

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Anne Golden, left, and Stephanie Barnes, right.

Fifteen days after a jury heard opening arguments in the United States government v. Stephanie Barnes case, Ms. Barnes was found guilty on all three counts by a jury Thursday, a result that sees Ms. Barnes facing a maximum prison sentence of eight years incarceration in federal prison.

The verdict came in under 6 hours of deliberation, suggesting that the jury was convinced Ms. Barnes committed the crimes. The federal government charged her with conspiracy to commit theft from programs and receiving federal funds in violation of U.S. law, receipt of stolen government monies, and filing a false tax return in violation of Virgin Islands law. The trial was presided over by Judge Robert Molloy.

During opening statements on Dec. 8, lead prosecutor Jill Koster said Ms. Barnes "knew what was in [Ms. Golden's] wallet," referring to the hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayer money that was said to be expended during the time of the crimes. Ms. Koster stated that while the federal government only needs to show that \$5,000 was stolen to launch an investigation, "this is not going to be a close call." She said evidence would show that much more money was stolen.

The jury believed it did, and Ms. Barnes has until Monday by 9:00 a.m. to turn herself in, as Judge Molloy believes she is a flight risk. Sentencing has been set for April 20, 2021.

Evidence showed that Ms. Barnes was a willing partner with former V.I. Casino Control Commission chairperson Violet Anne Golden in a conspiracy to steal both local and federal money, as well as filing a false tax return in violation of Virgin Islands law. Evidence showed that Ms. Barnes was given a \$65,000 contract from April to June 2015 by Ms. Golden, however what, exactly, the contract was for remains unclear. Evidence also showed that a total of \$568,104 went to Ms. Barnes, including more than \$113,000 in perks, vehicle and travel expenses.

Ms. Barnes's attorney, Martial Webster, came out swinging during opening statements, calling the government's charges "propaganda," and stating that the Office of the Inspector General's audit of the V.I. Casino Control Commission, led by Marsha Dubois, read more like a soap opera. Yet as the trial continued, Ms. Dubois's meticulous audit was praised by the prosecution, and it led to Thursday's outcome.

Throughout the hearing, the defense attempted to paint a picture that Ms. Barnes was oblivious to how the V.I. Casino Control Commission's funds were being spent. Instead, it was Ms. Golden, the defense contended, who was solely responsible for the misuse of government funds.

Atty. Martial said Ms. Golden had money problems and had maxed out twelve credit cards, and that contrary to what the prosecution said, Ms. Barnes did not know what was in Ms. Golden's wallet, an assertion appearing to support the defense's narrative that while Ms. Barnes traveled a number of times with Ms. Golden and partook in many activities together, she did not know that it was the C.C.C.'s money being spent.

"Anne Golden is not on trial; her conduct is not on trial," Mr. Webster reminded, trying to distance his client from Ms. Golden, who pleaded guilty to theft of government money and failing to file a tax return — crimes for which she served two years in prison.

The defense's argument was weakened when Ms. Golden [took the stand on Dec. 13](#). Several times, Assistant U.S. Attorney Koster asked Ms. Golden if she thought her actions in relation to fraudulent spending and Barnes's contract terms were appropriate. Each time, she responded and said, "In retrospect, no." That response was pointedly followed up by Attn. Koster asking, "Who benefited from this?" Each time, Ms. Golden responded, "Ms. Barnes."

Ms. Golden was also asked whether or not Ms. Barnes knew that she was using government funds—either in the form of VICCC credit cards or checks — to pay for Ms. Barnes's personal vehicle repairs, new vehicle, paid dependent travel, countless dinners, car rentals, hotel accommodations, several trips, and more. Ms. Golden confirmed, "Yes, she was told."

In the instance of Ms. Barnes's vehicle expenses, Ms. Golden paid upwards of \$10,000 on vehicular repairs for Ms. Barnes' personal vehicle, a 2007 Jeep Wrangler. Ms. Golden said that she was only trying to help Ms. Barnes as she needed reliable transportation to perform the duties of her job and commute with her son with a disability. Although work invoices at a St. Croix auto repair shop were billed to Ms. Barnes and Ms. Golden, neither party utilized their personal

finances to settle the bill. Instead, Ms. Golden utilized government funds.

“Did she ever offer to repay for funds used to pay for car expenses?” Attn. Koster asked. To this, Ms. Golden responded, “No.”

Eventually, Ms. Golden said that Ms. Barnes was without a vehicle altogether and came to Golden requesting that Golden help her co-sign on a loan to purchase a vehicle. Both parties agreed that once Ms. Barnes paid the \$10,000 down payment, Golden would assist Barnes in getting a USAA loan towards a 2016 Jeep Wrangler off the lot at Caribbean Auto Mart. The total value of the Jeep was about \$43,000 and both Barnes and Golden’s names are affixed to the title, as presented in evidence. Ms. Golden testified that she did this with the understanding that Ms. Barnes would pay on the note for a monthly payment of \$639 thereafter; however, Golden said that Barnes never did, so she continued to pay on the car note so it didn’t go into default.

On Dec. 14, [Ms. Golden continued providing testimony](#). If both parties traveled for a work-related conference, it was their custom to arrive early and leave late to accommodate Ms. Barnes’ requests, Ms. Golden said. One such trip was a 2016 attendance at the annual National Council on Problem Gambling conference in New York. When Ms. Golden was asked how long the conference was, she first responded by stating “a week and a couple days.” Upon showing Ms. Golden the conference brochure, she then stated that the conference was three or four days long. She said it was Barnes’s idea to go early and stay late since she wanted to take her son to see Broadway musical Hamilton, all at the government’s expense. Ms. Barnes presented at that conference and charged the VICCC a \$4,500 appearance fee on top of her trip expenses and personal expenses covered by Ms. Golden by way of the commission’s credit card. The VICCC's credit card was also used to [purchase the \\$5,000 per head Broadway tickets](#).

Golden confirmed that she viewed attending the conference that Barnes spoke at as a legitimate expense. Additionally, she admitted to not following the commission’s travel regulations.

Throughout questioning led by Attn. Koster, Ms. Golden constantly stated that she acquiesced to Barnes’s requests at the time. During the cross-examination, Barnes’s attorney Martial Webster said to Ms. Golden, “Anytime someone makes a request, you know you have the right to say ‘No.’” In response, Golden said that she paid the price for not doing so. In retrospect, Ms. Golden said that she now knows that those demands were often inappropriate.

Ms. Golden also helped her former friend and convicted co-conspirator by assisting Ms. Barnes with preparing her 2016 taxes. A draft of those tax return documents was published in evidence and showed that Barnes owed the IRB \$33,124. According to Ms. Golden, Barnes said that she could not pay that amount, so Ms. Golden sought to help her friend out by issuing a letter stating that some 1099s had to be corrected. She then adjusted some figures in Quickbooks, an accounting software, and issued Ms. Barnes a corrected 1099 that allowed her to pay back less in taxes. Golden said that Barnes knew that number was not accurate. “She benefitted,” Golden said in response to the prosecution asking who benefitted from that fraudulent act. Golden admitted to knowing that what she was doing was wrong.

Today's guilty verdict brings to a close a matter uncovered by a V.I. Inspector General audit led by Ms. Dubois. The [audit](#) covered April 2015 through 2018, and it revealed a flabbergasting array of questionable actions by Ms. Golden, whom the audit cast as running the operations of the commission as if she were the sole authority, making major financial transactions with no secondary signatory, among a plethora of other questionable actions.

