

NINTH DIVISION

[CA-G.R. CR-HC No. 06742, March 19, 2015]

**PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS.
THOMAS FLORETA Y MARIANO, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.**

DECISION

DICDICAN, J.:

It is a fundamental rule that findings of the trial courts which are factual in nature and which involve credibility are accorded respect when no glaring errors, gross misapprehension of facts, or speculative, arbitrary and unsupported conclusions can be gathered from such findings^[1]. The trial court's determination on the issue of credibility of witnesses and its consequent findings of facts must be given great weight and respect on appeal, unless certain facts or substance have been overlooked which, if considered, might affect the result of the case. This is so because of the judicial experience that trial courts are in a better position to decide the question of credibility, having heard the witnesses themselves and observed their deportment and manner of testifying during the trial^[2].

Before us is an appeal from the Decision^[3] rendered by Branch 231 of the Regional Trial Court of the National Capital Judicial Region located at Pasay City ("trial court") on March 18, 2013 in Criminal Cases Nos. R-PSY-11-04529-CR and R-PSY-11-04530-CR convicting herein accused-appellant Thomas M. Floreta ("accused-appellant") of violation of Sections 5 and 11 of Article II of Republic Act No. 9165, otherwise known as the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002 ("RA 9165"), in the following Informations which read:

Criminal Case No. R-PSY-11-04529-CR:

"That on or about the 11th day of December 2011, in Pasay City, Metro Manila, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, THOMAS FLORETA Y MARIANO, without authority of law, did then and there wilfully, unlawfully and feloniously sell and deliver to another one (1) heat-sealed transparent plastic sachet containing 0.07 gram of Methamphetamine Hydrochloride (shabu), a dangerous drug, without the corresponding license.

"Contrary to Law^[4].

Criminal Case No. R-PSY-11-04530-CR:

"That on or about the 11th day of December 2011, in Pasay City, Metro Manila, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, THOMAS FLORETA Y MARIANO, without authority

of law, did then and there wilfully, unlawfully and feloniously have in his possession, custody and control one (1) self-sealing transparent plastic sachet containing 19.48 grams of Ephedrine hydrochloride, a dangerous drug.

“Contrary to Law^[5].”

On January 24, 2012, upon being arraigned of the charges against him, the accused-appellant entered a plea of not guilty thereto^[6]. Subsequently, a pre-trial was conducted by the trial court on March 8, 2012^[7]. A trial on the merits of the instant case ensued thereafter.

The prosecution's recital of facts is as follows:

On December 11, 2011, a confidential informant reported to PO1 Roberto Cruz (PO1 Cruz) that a certain “Tamy” was selling illegal drugs around the areas of Manila and Makati^[8]. The person described as “Tamy” turned out to be the accused-appellant in this case.

Armed with the said information, a buy-bust team was created which was composed of PO1 Cruz who acted as a poseur-buyer and PO1 Silvestre Carpeso (PO1 Carpeso) who was designated as his back-up. As a poseur-buyer, PO1 Cruz was tasked to buy Eighty-Thousand Pesos (Php80,000.00) worth of illegal drugs from Tamy^[9]. He was also given a money marked with the letters “RL” representing the initials of Police Inspector Raymund Liguden who was the Chief of DAID-SOTG of Taguig City^[10]. The team also sent the required Coordination Form^[11] to the Philippine Drug Enforcement Authority (PDEA) for proper coordination.

Thereafter, the confidential informant called the accused-appellant and informed the latter that she had a friend who wanted to buy shabu. The confidential informant then handed the cellphone to PO1 Cruz and the latter asked if he could buy Eighty Thousand Pesos (Php80,000.00) worth of shabu from the accused-appellant. They then agreed to meet at a restaurant along Service Road, Roxas Boulevard, Pasay City where they would consummate the said transaction.

At around 9:30 in the evening of the same date, PO1 Cruz and the confidential informant arrived at the place that was agreed upon by the parties. Upon the arrival of the accused-appellant, however, he informed PO1 Cruz that the quality of the *shabu* which he got from his source was bad. The accused-appellant then offered another shabu amounting to One Thousand Pesos (P1,000.00) which, according to him, was of better quality^[12]. PO1 Cruz agreed to buy the said shabu and he gave the accused-appellant two (2) Five Hundred Peso bills. After PO1 Cruz got hold of the shabu, he asked the accused-appellant if he could take a look at the other shabu which was of bad quality.

As soon as PO1 Cruz saw the said *shabu*, he immediately removed his cap which was the pre-arranged signal to his team that the sale was already consummated^[13]. PO1 Cruz immediately arrested the accused-appellant and introduced himself as a police officer. The accused-appellant was likewise apprised of his constitutional rights. After the arrest of the accused-appellant, PO1 Cruz marked the illegal drug

subject of the sale as RC-1-111211 while the plastic sachet in the possession of the accused-appellant was marked as RC-2-111211. PO1 Cruz also recovered the two (2) Five Hundred Peso bills from the accused-appellant. After the illegal drugs were confiscated, the accused-appellant was then brought to the South District Police Station in Taguig City.

Upon arrival at the police station, PO1 Cruz handed the person of the accused-appellant, as well as the items seized, to SPO3 Salvio R. De Lima (SPO3 De Lima) who then brought the items to the laboratory for examination. The Physical Science Report No. D-671-11S^[14] prepared by Police Chief Inspector Abraham Verde Tecson (P/Chief Insp. Tecson) showed that, indeed, the plastic sachet that was handed to PO1 Cruz contained methamphetamine hydrochloride while the other plastic sachet found in the possession of the accused-appellant yielded positive results for ephedrine hydrochloride.

For his part, herein accused-appellant adduced in evidence his own testimony and that of his common-law spouse Mary Ann Salvador (Salvador).

The accused-appellant claimed that he was arrested on December 11, 2011 at around 11 o'clock in the morning^[15]. He narrated that, while he was walking along Quirino Avenue, corner San Andres Street, Malate, Manila, two (2) armed men in civilian clothes suddenly approached him and took him inside a white Crosswind vehicle. While he was inside the vehicle, the accused-appellant asked the armed men why they took him but they replied that it was only for verification purposes. The accused-appellant also recalled that there were other individuals inside the vehicle at that time and one of them was handcuffed. All of them were brought to the Southern Police District in Taguig City afterwards^[16].

Upon arrival at the police station, the accused-appellant alleged that he was brought inside the prison cell and he was told to call his relatives to ask them to bring the amount of Fifteen Thousand Pesos (P15,000.00)^[17]. The accused-appellant then told the police officers that he did not have the said amount of money.

Thus, at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, the accused-appellant called Salvador to inform the latter that he was detained at the Southern Police District in Taguig City. When Salvador arrived at the police station, she spoke with PO1 Cruz who allegedly asked her to bring the amount of Fifteen Thousand Pesos (P15,000.00). However, Salvador told them that they did not have said amount of money.

The accused-appellant further asseverated that he was brought to the Barangay Hall of Barangay 76 of Pasay City^[18] where the police officers ordered the barangay kagawad to sign some papers in his presence, despite his objections thereto.

On March 18, 2014, the court a quo rendered a Decision the dispositive portion of which reads:

"WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered finding the accused **THOMAS FLORETA y MARIANO guilty beyond reasonable doubt** of the charges of Violation of Section 5, Article II, Republic Act 9165 in Criminal Case No. R-PSY-11-04529-CR and Violation of Section 11, Article

II in Criminal Case No. R-PSY-11-04530-CR and is hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment and is hereby ordered to pay a fine of Five Hundred Thousand Pesos (Php500,000.00) for the charge of Violation of Section 5, Article II, R.A. 9165 and also to suffer the penalty of life imprisonment and to pay a fine of Five Hundred Thousand Pesos (Php500,000.00) for the charge of Violation of Section 11, Article II, R.A. 9165

"The Officer-in-Charge is hereby directed to transmit the 0.07 gram of Methamphetamine Hydrochloride and the 19.48 grams of Ephedrine Hydrochloride confiscated from the accused to the PDEA for its proper disposition.

"SO ORDERED^[19]."

Not satisfied with the foregoing decision, herein accused-appellant interposed the instant appeal before this Court raising the following errors that were purportedly committed by the trial court, to wit:

I.

THE COURT *A QUO* GRAVELY ERRED IN FINDING THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT GUILTY OF THE OFFENSES CHARGED DESPITE THE POLICE OFFICERS' NON-COMPLIANCE WITH SECTION 21 OF R.A. NO 9165 AND ITS IMPLEMENTING RULES.

II.

THE COURT *A QUO* GRAVELY ERRED IN FINDING THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT GUILTY OF THE OFFENSES CHARGED DESPITE THE BROKEN CHAIN OF CUSTODY IN THE PRESERVATION OF THE CONFISCATED DRUGS.

In sum, the primordial issue brought before this Court for resolution is whether the court *a quo* erred in convicting herein accused-appellant beyond reasonable doubt of the charges against him.

After a careful and thorough review of the facts, together with the laws and jurisprudence applicable to this case, we sustain accused-appellant's conviction.

The accused-appellant contended that the trial court gravely erred in finding him guilty beyond reasonable doubt of violating Sections 5 and 11 of RA 9165. He maintained that the chain of custody of the pieces of evidence that were used against him was broken.

Verily, the crime of illegal sale and possession of shabu is penalized under Sections 5 and 11 of Article II of RA 9165 which, in part, provide:

"Section 5. Sale, Trading, Administration, Dispensation, Delivery, Distribution and Transportation of Dangerous Drugs and/or Controlled Precursors and Essential Chemicals. – The penalty of life imprisonment to death and a fine ranging from Five Hundred Thousand Pesos (P500,000.00) to Ten Million Pesos (P10,000,000.00) shall be imposed