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Thrasher cleared in fatal beach crash

Carova man had faced two counts of murder

By **BEN DECK**
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CURRITUCK — A Carova man was cleared Thursday of all charges stemming from a fatal crash on the Outer Banks.

William "Rusty" Thrasher sat impassively as Judge Richard Parker read down the list of not guilty verdicts a jury returned at 11:40 a.m. Thrasher had been charged

with two counts of second degree murder and two counts of assault in connection with the crash, and he could have faced more than 50 years in jail had he been convicted.

"I think that it became clear through the testimony... that Rusty Thrasher did not cause that wreck," said Danny Glover, one of Thrasher's attorneys.

Prosecutors accused Thrasher of driving while intoxicated and speeding along the beach on the evening of March 16, 2001. He was driving a white Ford van

that collided head-on with the red Ford pickup truck carrying Cameron Dixon, Robert Kelly, Matthew Paul Sykes and Michael Harris.

The truck was driven by Sykes, and Dixon and Kelly were killed in the crash.

Several friends and family members attended each day of the nearly two-week trial, and Dixon's mother, Annie, crumpled as the verdict was read. She buried her head in her hands and cried, and said afterward she cannot understand how Thrasher could be acquitted.

"More people are killed each year by drunk drivers than ever went down in the World Trade Center," Annie Dixon said. "Nobody cares."

Prosecutors also hit hard on the driving while intoxicated issue, painting it as the centerpiece of their case. But the charges against Thrasher carried a very specific requirement — jury members had to decide that Thrasher was responsible for setting of the chain of events that led to the crash.

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PHOTO BY BEN DECK

Defense lawyer Danny Glover (left) and defendant William "Rusty" Thrasher listen as the verdict is read in Currituck Superior Court Thursday.

THRASHER

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Defense attorneys called witnesses who testified that Sykes had driven aggressively on the beach, forcing other drivers to veer off the line he was taking through the sand. Another defense witness — an emergency medical worker — testified that Sykes admitted to using Klonopin, a prescription anti-depressant for which he had not been prescribed.

Sykes testified he had not taken the drug on the day of the crash, but emergency medical workers found a bottle of Klonopin pills in his pants pocket while treating him after the crash. One of the workers testified that, while being treated, Sykes said he had taken one of the pills.

"There's just no telling how that Klonopin affected

"I'll just have to try to make sense of something that has no sense."

Annie Dixon
Victim's mother

Matt Sykes' ability to drive," Glover said.

No test was run to determine whether Sykes was under the influence of any drugs at the time of the crash, but Thrasher's blood was

tested for alcohol and he was found to be over the legal limit. Defense attorneys pointed to the inconsistent information about Sykes' condition and told jury members Thrasher should not be considered at fault for the crash.

Tom Anglim, the attorney who lead the prosecution against Thrasher, said he does not think there is a particular piece of information which would have brought a conviction against Thrasher. The criminal charges required jury members to run down a complex list of legal

requirements, and it can be difficult to convince people of such issues, he said.

"It just illustrates how difficult it can be (for a jury) to decide," Anglim said.

But the legal analysis was cold comfort for Annie Dixon, who had already prepared a statement explaining how the loss of her son has affected her life. The statement would only have come into play had Thrasher been convicted.

"I'll just have to try to make sense of something that has no sense," Dixon said.