

(Intro music)

Hillel Aron: Hello, and welcome to our very special end-of-the-year gala edition of Sidebar, a podcast from Courthouse News Service. I am your host today, Hillel Aron, coming to you from Los Angeles, California, and I am joined by the entire Sidebar team. Amanda Pampuro, in Denver, Colorado.

Amanda Pampuro: Greetings.

HA: From the great state of Texas, we have Kirk McDaniel.

Kirk McDaniel: Hey, y'all.

HA: Don't worry listener, he lives in Austin. And live from our nation's Capitol, we have the one, the only, Kelsey Reichmann.

Kelsey Reichmann: Hello.

HA: So, for the last five years, and I mean it feels like longer, but for the last five years, one man has dominated the news, and I'm speaking, of course, of Donald Trump, the former real estate mogul slash game show host slash president of the United States. You may have read about him. But this was the year that Donald Trump took over Courthouse News, where Trump himself, not his supporters, not his confederates, but Trump himself appeared in court as a defendant many, many times. How many times, Kelsey?

KR: There are five big cases currently in progress, four of which are criminal cases, with a total of 91 felony charges.

HA: 91.

AP: Don't forget, there are more than 160 civil suits, including pro se complaints. But there's also a handful of really interesting ones trying to knock Trump off the 2024 ballot.

HA: And we'll get to some of those a little later. But the first criminal complaint against Trump was filed in New York in March for illegal hush money payments to an adult film actress, Stormy Daniels, who Trump allegedly had an affair with. I spoke to Courthouse News' very own Josh Russell, friend of the show, about the case.

Josh Russell: A previous Manhattan DA, Cy Vance, refused to bring the case and then, when the new Manhattan DA, Alvin Bragg, took over, it was referred to as a zombie case they revived from the dead. And it ultimately became the first indictment naming Trump criminal.

HA: And do we have a sense of why this zombie case was revived?

JR: There was speculation that the earlier DA wouldn't bring the case because they didn't trust Michael Cohen as a witness, which some people still don't, but they seemed to gamble on it for this one. I feel like the Manhattan DA case was like the canary in the cave for all these other prosecutors to bring charges against Trump. It's just sort of a test to see if you could like, logistically and physically, arraign this former president, this particular former president.

HA: The trial is currently scheduled for March of 2024, shortly after the Super Tuesday primaries, though it will most likely get postponed. And, like Josh said, after the first indictment a dam seemed to burst.

AP: Yeah, that's right. June brought an indictment over Trump mishandling classified documents found at his Mar-a-Lago resort.

HA: This was the thing with the boxes, right?

AP: Right. Every media outlet was posting photos of cardboard boxes, apparently full of military secrets, just piled on the ballroom stage and stacked around a bathroom shower. Steve Garrison has been following this case for us.

Steve Garrison: Trump is accused of basically mishandling classified documents that he had retained after he left the White House in 2021. The National Archives had been requesting those records from him for months, and so the FBI ended up executing a search warrant of which, I'm sure, most people remember, last year at Mar-a-Lago, and they recovered dozens of classified documents, which now are the subject of this criminal case. Documents were apparently being kept at various places in Mar-a-Lago, which obviously is a public resort that's visited by tens of thousands of people every year, and there were documents kind of kept in, I think, in the indictment says scores of boxes, just boxes kept in a bathroom, in his personal bedroom, in a storage room, and right now it's kind of in the pre-trial phase. There's been a lot of motions over discovery issues. The case is complicated by the fact that evidence contains classified information.

AP: The Trump team wanted this one paused until after the election, but the judge working the case in the Southern District of Florida, Aileen Cannon, she has this one slated for a May 2024 trial.

HA: And Aileen Cannon is seen by many as a pro-Trump judge, right?

AP: Yeah, he appointed her, but so far, Steve tells me Cannon's been pretty by the book.

HA: And this case was brought about by the special prosecutor, Jack Smith, right?

AP: Probably the most famous Mr. Smith in America.

HA: Right, he had a busy year, Jack Smith, because he also indicted Trump in Washington, D.C.

KR: Yeah, this was the third Trump indictment, and it stems from Trump's behavior before and during the January 6th insurrection. Ryan Knappenberger has been following this case for us.

Ryan Knappenberger: Trump's case in Washington, D.C., brought by special counsel Jack Smith, charges Trump with four criminal counts. Three conspiracy charges related to, specifically, conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, conspiracy against rights, specifically Americans' rights to vote and to have one's vote counted. The fourth is just outright obstruction of an official proceeding. All relate to President Trump's efforts to maintain his grip on power after his 2020 electoral defeat, which began with a multi-pronged criminal conspiracy to sow doubt on the 2020 election, pressure election officials throughout the country and in the federal government, to basically hand him the 2020 election. And when all those failed, culminating in the January 6th insurrection, where Trump urged a mob of his supporters to march on the Capitol and violently clashed with police in an effort to either intimidate, or just outright take the government by storm, for him.

KR: Since the January 6th insurrection, over a thousand people have faced charges for storming the Capitol. Around 600 individuals pleaded guilty to federal charges, resulting in prison time. Prosecution against the rioters have, for the most part, centered on the actual insurrection: breaking into the Capitol,

assaulting police officers and obstructing an official proceeding. The case against the former president centers a little more on the lead-up to those actions.

RK: Trump's case is a little more overreaching. It's basically the same timeframe, November 2020 until January 6th, the day of the certification of the 2020 election results. But in the lead-up to the actual day of, a lot of Trump's case deals with his kind of multi-pronged criminal conspiracy to sow doubt around the 2020 election by spreading claims of widespread election fraud, trying to pressure election officials throughout the country to basically hand him the election, as well as trying to create false electors, Trump's supporters, to submit their ballots and turn over these swing state's electoral votes for Trump so that they could basically kind of use it on the day of the election certification on January 6th to like submit these false electors, have conservative allies in the House and in the Senate challenge the election results from these states. The idea was that would go on for some number of hours until there was enough of a controversy where Mike Pence could basically throw out the electoral votes for Joe Biden and instead accept those supporting Trump and effectively just hand him the election. When that failed, that's what then turned into the January 6th riot.

KR: Trump's lawyers are trying to dismiss the case, claiming his actions on, and leading up, to January 6th were related to his presidential duties. These arguments stem from a 1982 case from the Supreme Court, *Nixon v Fitzgerald*, in which the justices narrowly held that presidents are entitled to absolute immunity from damages liability based on official actions.

RK: So, Trump is taking that one step farther and saying that he should be immune from criminal liability, because his definition is that he was trying to secure the election. Basically, they were election integrity efforts, which, not sure exactly how that would go, but that's been one of his biggest arguments.

KR: An interesting side battle in Trump's D.C. case is the fight over cameras in the courtroom. Federal courtrooms traditionally do not allow TV broadcasts, but a group of media organizations has urged the judge to grant special access so the public and press can have greater access to the proceedings. The Department of Justice has resisted this call, claiming it would grant Trump special privileges and play into his wish to try his case in the court of public opinion. The scheduled start date for the jury selection for Trump's D.C. trial is March 4th. However, we probably won't know for sure if that day will stick until the day comes.

RK: Outside of his in-courtroom defenses, his main strategy is delay, delay, delay.

HA: Kirk McDaniel, the fourth indictment. Where was this one?

KM: In Georgia.

HA: And what was this one all about, then?

KM: Yeah, this case centers on the pressure campaign Trump and his allies went on to try and flip the results in the Southern state. Georgia is, historically speaking, a red state. However, thanks to the help of voters in dense urban areas like Atlanta, Biden took the state, further solidifying his electoral victory. I talked with Megan Butler, our reporter who's been following the case. She pointed out that it's more than just the former president who's been criminally charged in this case.

Megan Butler: The indictment in a nutshell, which came out in August, says that Trump and 18 others were in this enterprise, and they knew that he lost the election, but tried to change the outcome anyways in his favor. Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, she launched this investigation, spurred off a phone call that was released shortly after January 2021, which Trump called Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger and essentially was like hey, can you find enough votes for me where I win the election in Georgia?

Donald Trump: So, look all I want to do is this: I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have, because we won the state.

HA: This is a RICO case, right?

KM: Yes, you're right. All the defendants have been charged with violating the state's Racketeer, Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act or, as you said, RICO Act. The statute is typically used to go after organized crime like street gangs or the mob, and I asked Megan about how prosecutors are trying to get RICO charges to stick.

MB: So, in Trump's case, what they're trying to claim, prosecutors, is that he was kind of the so-called gang leader of this enterprise and had all his attorneys and campaign folks and essentially misled them into working for him and helping prove his claims of election fraud. Something interesting about this case in particular with Trump is you have, you know, your people with more severe charges, kind of at the top, like we have Trump and Rudy Giuliani, who both have 13 charges, and then you have, you know, his attorneys, who only have like three charges, and they're kind of going after them to get plea deals out of them so they can use their testimony to go after the more bigger criminals, so to say.

KM: We've actually already seen several defendants take guilty pleas. In October, Sidney Powell and Kenneth Cheseboro, attorneys who represented Trump, pleaded guilty and were replaced on probation and ordered to pay fines. Most recently, Jenna Ellis, another one of Trump's attorneys, also pleaded guilty. She actually gave a statement before the court saying that she was wrong to go along with Trump's false claims about the election.

Jenna Ellis: What I did not do but should have done, your honor, was to make sure that the facts the other lawyers alleged to be true were in fact true. In the frenetic pace of attempting to raise challenges to the election in several states, including Georgia, I failed to do my due diligence. I believe in, and I value, election integrity. If I knew then what I know now, I would have declined to represent Donald Trump in these post-election challenges. I look back on this whole experience with deep remorse.

KM: One thing that really stuck with me from my conversation with Megan was how all these different criminal cases against Trump actually may affect one another, especially the federal election interference case.

MB: What happens in the federal trial is largely going to impact what happens here, I think. A lot of these people who have taken plea deals, or are expected to, are likely to be called in to testify in the federal case as well. So, it's gonna be really interesting to see how that unfolds because I think it's gonna have a large effect on in Georgia.

HA: Trump was also involved in numerous civil trials, but some of them were pretty big and one of them actually went to trial. New York State Attorney General Leticia James is suing Trump over claims he

fraudulently inflated the value of assets owned by the Trump Organization to secure better rates for bank loans and insurance for his properties, and maybe also to make the Forbes list of billionaires. The trial for this one is actually going on as we record this, excitingly. I spoke to one of our many other New York reporters, Erik Uebelacker, who's been covering the trial from the Isle of Manhattan.

Erik Uebelacker: So, they're alleging that by, you know, falsely inflating, or in some cases deflating, the value of some of his most famous and biggest properties, that he actually ended up defrauding banks and insurers out of like hundreds of millions of dollars.

HA: We should say the judge in this case, Arthur Engoron, has already found Trump guilty on summary judgment of the most serious fraud count.

EU: So, that's the top count of fraud that he did that. They proved that he did that, now the rest of the trial is determining the damages and whether or not he also committed like tax and insurance fraud by then using those fraudulent statements of financial condition to obtain those benefits.

HA: As we said, Trump has been a party to a lot of legal actions this year, but this is one of the few that he's actually been in court for, at least some of the days. His children are testifying and even he's testified. The thing that I find so fascinating about this trial is the big question I've always had on Trump is on full display. Which is he? Is he crazy, or is he crazy like a fox? Is he just emotionally reacting to everything, or is he playing a complex chess game? I actually spoke to Erik on the day after Trump testified.

EU: He is a very emotional person, and we know that seeing him as president and there were times yesterday where you could tell he was actually mad, he was furious. He doesn't like that, you know, that's kind of the one thing that he had after being president. He was subjected to a lot of criticism from the things that he did in office, but the one thing that he kind of was able to hold on to was the fact that he was this real estate mogul and now that's being called into question. So, you could tell he's kind of having a little bit of a like it looks like an identity crisis up there on the stand.

HA: But a part of this behavior might be calculated, or at least it could end up playing into Trump's hands, either politically or when they appeal the verdict, which they almost certainly will.

EU: He's trying to fire up his base. He's trying to, you know, make the judge maybe do a misstep, maybe act out of character a little bit so that he could go to appeal. But, I mean, I'm signed up to get his campaign emails during the trial because he's been using a lot of things that have been said in the courtroom to directly pump out a campaign email, and, I mean, it's like clockwork every time the judge says anything about Trump. Yesterday one of his quotes was you know, "I'm not here to hear what Donald Trump has to say," because his lawyers were trying to use that as kind of a reasoning to let him sit up there and ramble. And the judge snapped, he said, "I'm not here to hear what he has to say, he's here to answer questions." And Trump immediately fired off a campaign email that said, you know, "This judge doesn't want to hear what I have to say, listen to this quote." Every single time the judge issues any kind of sanctions or threatens any kind of sanctions towards him, he's immediately turning around and using that to campaign.

HA: This trial has been pretty wild. The judge issued a gag order barring Trump from making any public statements about the judge's staff. Trump has violated that order twice and has been fined \$20,000. But surely the most dramatic day was when the former president testified.

EU: Seeing Trump take the stands for an extended period of time was, you know, it was a pretty wild thing to see and probably not something that we're going to see from too many other U.S. presidents, hopefully, in the future. But basically he was, the first 40 minutes, the judge was getting so irate already because Trump was really just rambling on these very simple yes or no answers about his financial statements and, you know, saying things like oh, I have all this money. I was busy protecting the country, doing such a great job, a much better job than what's being done right now, as you can see what's going on. He didn't say Biden by name, but it was one of those Trumpisms where it was like you know, I did a great job, much better than what's happening right now. It's, it's a disgrace what's happening right now. The judge kept having to ask Trump's lawyers to control your witness or control your client, because Trump was just in the very beginning, he was rambling, he was going on and on saying the same things he said to the media, not answering the questions. That was pissing off the judge, and then at one point the judge was having kind of a shouting match with Trump's lawyers and Trump steps in on the stand, on the witness stand, and just leans into the mic and says, "This is a very unfair trial, very, very unfair. I hope the world is watching this." But, then later in the day there were days where he was just yelling on the microphone.

HA: Before we move on, let's just mention two other pretty big civil cases Trump was involved in this year. And for the first of those, let's hear from a very special guest, former Sidebar co-host Nina Pullano. She covered writer E. Jean Carroll's lawsuit and subsequent trial where the former Elle Magazine advice columnist accused Trump of raping her in the mid-90s in the fitting room at a Bergdorf Goodman.

Nina Pullano: Hi, I'm Nina Pullano. I'm an editor for Courthouse News based in New York City. By now, we've all gotten an earful about the various charges against Donald Trump. The first of these to go to trial earlier this year was the civil case brought by writer E. Jean Carroll. She sued Trump, saying that he had sexually assaulted her in the mid-1990s at the Bergdorf Goodman department store in Manhattan. And it wasn't just E. Jean Carroll who told her story during trial, two other women described sexual misconduct by Donald Trump. One was around 1979, 1980 and another in 2005. What really struck me was listening to each of these women represent what the culture was like for them and what it took for them to speak out. You could almost see a through line as to how we talk about harassment and abuse and how things have shifted over time in our conversation. E. Jean Carroll, you know, only told her story decades later, because she explained when she testified, she was part of the silent generation and was told to keep her head up and move on with her life. But by 2005, the journalist who testified and said that Trump had pushed himself on her at Mar-a-Lago, as soon as she got home, she went in and asked to be taken off the Trump beat immediately. And I think as a journalist, it can be disheartening to cover stories of abuse sometimes, even just listening to expert testimony is a reminder of how widespread it is for relationships to have a toxic or an abusive dynamic and the lifelong impact on survivors. But I think that hearing not only E. Jean Carroll's personal journey going from silence to speaking out and ultimately winning her case against Donald Trump, but also to see the needle moving culturally, the reception to survivor stories changing, I think offered a sense of encouragement that I hope was able to make it out to people from behind the fog of politics and power that inevitably is gonna surround a trial like this and the rest of these as well. That verdict came out in May. E. Jean Carroll was awarded \$5 million. She has another closely related lawsuit that's still pending in Manhattan federal court.

HA: Nice to hear from Nina again. Amanda, what's going on with Trump in Denver?

AP: We've seen a handful of state civil suits trying to block Trump from the 2024 primary ballot. The 14th Amendment says you can't hold office if you engaged in insurrection or rebellion, and you know, Trump rang a false alarm over the 2020 election results, and then told an angry mob to walk down to the Capitol on January 6th, 2021. Congress passed that law after the Civil War because it was awkward to see Confederate statesmen just walk back in like nothing happened. So far, the ballot suits have all failed in New Hampshire, in Minnesota and in Michigan, mainly because of wonky technicalities that make for better dissertations than headlines. So, if you're listening to this and this is your law school project, I want to talk to you. To date, Denver Judge Sarah Wallace is the only one to take it through an expedited court trial, after which she found that, yes, Trump committed an insurrection and, no, his insightful speech was not protected by the First Amendment. But she also found he still gets to run because she's not sure the president counts as an officer of the United States as specified by the law, and she'd rather err on the side of democracy. So, being the only president since George Washington who didn't hold prior office, Trump gets to narrowly squeeze onto the ballot. Both parties are appealing the Colorado case, and I am covering arguments this month.

HA: Of course, 2023 wasn't all about Trump. One trial which received an enormous amount of media attention and which I found fascinating, was the criminal trial of Sam Bankman-Fried, founder of the cryptocurrency exchange FTX. Josh Russell covered that one for us as well.

JR: Sam Bankman-Fried is the 31-year-old founder of the FTX crypto exchange that, in the last two to three years, got enormously popular as this almost, almost mainstream platform to trade cryptocurrency digital assets on. Almost a year ago to the day, FTX went bankrupt and then a month later, he was indicted by federal prosecutors for a wire-fraud conspiracy and money laundering, plundering billions of dollars.

HA: FTX is the company that came closest to making cryptocurrency exchanges mainstream. They ran Super Bowl ads with Larry David.

Super Bowl ad: Like I was saying, it's FTX, it's a safe and easy way to get into crypto. Eh, I don't think so. And I'm never wrong about this stuff, never.

HA: FTX was very popular, and so was Sam Bankman-Fried. For a time. He had this terrible haircut, dressed like a slob and was seen as one of those classic tech genius iconoclasts. But his shtick did not play well in court. Bankman-Fried took the unusual step of testifying on his own behalf, and it did not go well.

JR: His testimony certainly didn't help him. He was supposed to be this guy who was constantly thinking in probabilities, like that's how he based all these financial decisions on probability, like a whole probability theory. I think he decided very poorly to take the stand because his direct testimony was not charming or like, endearing at all. And it opened him up to cross-examination and he just got destroyed on cross-examination. He came off incredibly smarmy at times. He did a lot of like, "Yep, yep," kind of responses and then hundreds of, "I don't recall," in a smarmy kind of response to prosecutor's questioning. He can't help it, he's a nerd, he's like a cryptocurrency nerd.

HA: Josh said Bankman-Fried's lawyers did him no favors either.

JR: And his lawyers were not particularly vigorous in their defense, either. I was thinking about, I covered Martin Shkreli, the pharma bro, five or six years ago. He was able to beat five out of eight counts for like

a similar type of plundering customer funds. And he had, like a terrific lawyer, Benjamin Brafman, who's one of these classic New York, almost classic fighting lawyer. He did beat five out of eight counts, but I didn't see any of that fight for Bankman-Fried. Bankman-Fried was represented by the lawyers who represented Ghislaine Maxwell. It was both the prosecutors and defense in this SBF trial were a rematch of the same lawyers in the government's case against Ghislaine Maxwell.

HA: Bankman-Fried is still awaiting sentencing as we record this, but he could spend anywhere from 20 years to the rest of his life in prison. Another trial this year that got a lot of media coverage was the Alex Murdaugh murder trial.

AP: It's one of those trials everyone was livestreaming. You got millions of views on YouTube and Netflix put out a documentary billing it a Southern scandal.

HA: Who was Murdaugh?

AP: He was a very powerful, well-connected lawyer in South Carolina who was accused of killing his wife, Maggie, and their 22-year-old son, Paul. Steve Garrison covered the trial in January.

SG: The Murdaugh family was just so prominent in this community, Hampton, and Colton County, generally. His great-grandfather, his grandfather and his father were all prosecutors, we call them solicitors here. You know, it was almost 100 years of controlling the local solicitor's office and then on top of that they also ran a prominent private law firm that had been around for you know, also a century. The Murdaugh family was in the red. They were borrowing money significantly. At the same time, Murdaugh was, apparently for over a decade, stealing from his clients, millions of dollars from his clients. He said that that money was used to feed an opioid addiction that had developed after he was injured playing football, he was a quarterback in college and so he had this, you know, decades long opioid addiction. It's spiraled out of control, he needed money to feed that addiction. They didn't find the murder weapon. What really, I think that probably most significant evidence was they ended up, I believe it was the FBI, was called in to try to access his son Paul Murdaugh's cell phone, and they finally were able to break the code on it, and on the phone they found a video that Paul had tried to send a friend of his and it was taken at the dog kennels, which is where the murders took place, only minutes before the murders allegedly took place. You know, on that video you can actually clearly hear Alex Murdaugh. You know he's yelling at a dog or something in the background of the video. Murdaugh had his alibi was that he was nowhere near the dog kennels. He was visiting his mother at the time of the murders, and so that really punctured his alibi and when he took the stand he basically had to say, oh, you know, yeah, I, I lied, I was at the dog kennels. And yeah, he claimed that his opioid addiction had made him paranoid. You know, it wasn't exactly strongest argument for lying about something like that for months.

AP: Alex Murdaugh received two consecutive life sentences in March, which his attorneys are appealing on a theory of jury tampering.

HA: There were, of course, many other trials we covered this year, and we don't have time to discuss them all, but we thought we'd do sort of a lightning round with some of our reporters all over the country recapping some of the most memorable cases of this year.

Molly Quell: My name is Molly Quell and I'm based in the Netherlands, where I cover international justice in the Hague and around Europe. The most interesting and important case I covered this year

were the preliminary hearings between Russia and Ukraine at the International Court of Justice, the United Nations' highest court. The court held two weeks of hearings about jurisdiction in March. Ukraine is using a novel legal approach to argue that Russia is in breach of the genocide convention. Kiev is not claiming that Moscow is committing genocide, but rather that Russia is in violation of the post-war treaty by using the false accusation of genocide against Ukraine as a pretext for the invasion. Ukraine has received a record-breaking amount of support from other countries in the case, with 33 states filing interventions on its behalf. Those countries were also allowed to make arguments at these hearings. The wheels of international justice turn very slowly, but we should have some decisions in the case next year.

Joe Duhownik: Hi, I'm Joe Duhownik, and I'm the Phoenix reporter for Courthouse News. I cover Arizona federal court and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. My favorite case I've covered this year is *USA v Michael Lacey*, in which the founder and a few former executives of the classified ads website Backpage.com, which operated from 2004 to 2018, are accused of facilitating prostitution and money laundering. Backpage was under a lot of scrutiny from human rights organizations and a lot of governmental agencies before the FBI seized it in 2018 because of the high volume of people that were sex trafficked on the site, most often disguised as escorts or other adult service providers. This was the second trial against the five. The first was declared a mistrial in 2021. The case raises salient questions about the First Amendment in internet communications law. The biggest question is when, if ever, can an internet service provider be held liable for third-party content posted on that provider's website, and what lines have to be crossed for the provider to lose protections given to them by section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Michael Lacey, the website's founder, who also founded the Phoenix New Times, was convicted on one count of international concealment money laundering and found innocent on another money laundering count. The jury returned no verdict for the remaining 84 counts stacked against him, so the government could come back around and try him on those charges for a third time if they wanted to. Two other executives were found guilty of conspiracy to facilitate prostitution, as well as dozens of money laundering counts, and finally, two lower-level employees were found not guilty of all prostitution counts lodged against them.

Andrew Nelson: This is Andrew Nelson, the Nebraska reporter for Courthouse News Service, and the most newsworthy court cases I covered this year were the guilty pleas and sentencings of Celeste and Jessica Burgess in Madison County, Nebraska, in connection to a late-term abortion by Celeste Burgess, who was 17 in 2022 when the abortion occurred. Jessica Burgess is Celeste Burgess's mother. The case received national attention because investigators subpoenaed Facebook Messenger messages as part of their investigation, and it appeared to some people that authorities were going after women and families involved in abortion. It was a medication abortion, one that took place around the 30th week of pregnancy, far outside of Nebraska abortion law and the protections of *Roe v. Wade*, which had not been overturned when the abortion occurred. The county attorney said in court that the fetus was viable at the time of the abortion. It was never made clear why the abortion took place so late in pregnancy. The county attorney also talked in court about the details of the disposal of the fetus, how it had been burned, buried, dug up and buried again in an attempt to hide what happened. Both pleaded guilty to reduced charges. Celeste, who had the abortion, was sentenced to a short jail term and has been released. Jessica Burgess was sentenced to two years in prison, which is likely to be reduced to one year under Nebraska's good time law.

Alan Riquelmy: My name is Alan Riquelmy. I'm a reporter for Courthouse News based in Sacramento, California. I cover federal and some superior courts in California, sticking mostly to civil matters.

However, one of the most important cases I've covered this year is the criminal murder case of Carlos Dominguez. Dominguez, a former UC Davis student, was accused in connection with two fatal stabbings and a third stabbing that left a woman injured. These attacks put the city of Davis, a college town, on edge. After Dominguez's arrest in early May, the police chief said evidence pointed to a potential serial killer. A June medical report stated Dominguez wasn't competent, which led prosecutors to push back and ultimately led to a trial on the issue of competency. What followed was a series of Dominguez's former friends and roommates, as well as a former girlfriend, testifying about his spiral into mental illness. Additionally, doctors testified about his schizophrenia diagnosis. Ultimately, after about a week into the jury trial, prosecutors backed off and conceded Dominguez, then 21, was incompetent to stand trial. He's now in a state hospital where doctors are trying to restore his sanity. If they succeed, prosecutors could then try him on the murder accusations.

HA: That is going to do it for Sidebar. Thanks to Kirk, Amanda and Kelsey for helping me recap what has been a remarkable year in Courthouse News coverage. Thanks to all the reporters who did the work for us, really: Josh Russell, Steve Garrison, Ryan Knappenberger, Erik Uebelacker, Nina Pullano and Megan Butler. And thanks to our editors, Jamie Ross, Bill Dottinga and Sean Duffy. And, most of all, thank you, listeners. We'll be back in 2024 with more Sidebar. Until then, stay out of trouble.

(Outro music)