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MAN CONVICTED OF TORTURE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASE INVOLVING STRANGULATION

RIVERSIDE – In what is believed to be the first case in California, possibly the nation, in which expert testimony established torture by strangulation, a Riverside man has been convicted in a domestic violence case that could result in his receiving a life sentence.

While there may have been people convicted of torture by strangulation in cases where a victim lost consciousness or received broken bones, this case is unique in that neither happened to this victim.

Michael Lamar Vanderwood, DOB: 4-22-64, was found guilty on Nov. 22, 2016, of torture, domestic violence causing great bodily injury, and making criminal threats. After hearing testimony for about a week during the trial, the Riverside County jury took less than two hours to find Vanderwood guilty of all counts.

Vanderwood, a professor at the University of California, Riverside, is scheduled to be sentenced on Dec. 28, 2016, in Dept. 54 at the Hall of Justice in Riverside. He faces a potential maximum sentence of life in prison.

Vanderwood and the victim in the case had been married about 10 years when, on Aug. 23, 2014, the victim returned home after a trip to Temecula with some girlfriends. Vanderwood then began a lengthy verbal attack on her -- yelling, cursing, and threatening the victim. After going upstairs, the victim heard Vanderwood coming up there as well. Because, as she told authorities, she was “scared to death”, she turned on the recording device of her smartphone.

The victim was attacked by Vanderwood upstairs during which he forced her face into a pillow, strangled her with one hand several times and then strangled her with both hands, plugged her nose, and placed her in a chokehold. She described to authorities that, when he strangled her while lying down, she could not breathe, she felt her eyes roll back into her head, and everything became “foggy”. While in a separate chokehold, she described becoming dizzy, lightheaded, and having blurred vision. During the assault, which lasted more than 20 minutes, Vanderwood also threatened to break bones and bent her fingers back causing what the victim described as “tortuous” pain.

Once the victim was finally able to flee Vanderwood and her home, she hid outside behind a neighbor’s trash cans as Vanderwood tried to find her while driving his truck in the neighborhood. The victim ultimately managed to contact a friend who helped her call 911 and get treatment at a nearby hospital. The victim’s injuries from the assault included bruising and swelling to the left side of her face and swelling to her left eye that all lasted nearly a month. Due to the strangulations, she could not eat for a week, had difficulty swallowing and breathing, experienced severe headaches and changes to her voice, and had trouble with her memory and focusing.

During the trial, the prosecution called one of the nation’s foremost forensic medical experts in strangulation, Dr. William Smock from Kentucky. Smock reviewed the audio recording from the victim’s phone as well as photographs and medical records prior to his testimony. Although the victim never lost consciousness and there were no bone fractures, the jury found Vanderwood guilty of the torture count due to the repeated strangulation of the victim resulting in the infliction of great bodily injury.

The case, RIF1403467, was prosecuted by Deputy District Attorney Tara Urban of the DA’s Special Victims Unit, Domestic Violence Trial Team.

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