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NEWS RELEASE
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**MURRIETA COUPLE ENTER GUILTY PLEAS AND ARE SENTENCED
FOR THE ABUSE AND TORTURE OF 5-YEAR-OLD BOY**

MURRIETA – The biological father of a Murrieta boy who was abused for several months to the point of becoming comatose and the man’s live-in girlfriend both entered guilty pleas and were sentenced today, June 15, 2018.

The boy’s father, Benjamin Matthew Whitten, DOB: 2-24-84, pled guilty to eight counts, including child abuse and assault likely to cause great bodily injury or death. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison.

Jeryn Christine Johnson, DOB: 4-27-92, Whitten’s live-in girlfriend, pled guilty to three counts, including torture and child abuse causing the victim to become comatose. She was sentenced to two consecutive life sentences.

The two entered guilty pleas on the morning that their preliminary hearing was set to happen before Judge William Lebov at the Southwest Justice Center in Murrieta.

Before Judge Lebov sentenced the two, Whitten’s mother, the victim’s paternal grandmother, addressed the court.

Leslie Whitten described her grandson as a “once bubbly, active little boy ... now confined to a wheelchair.” She told the judge that the boy is “learning to walk, talk, and eat again” adding that the family knows he has a long road to recovery because of the abuse he endured.

He was “a helpless victim against crimes committed on his little self with no way to defend himself,” she said.

On Aug. 15, 2017, Murrieta police officers were called to a home in the 24000 block of Verdun Lane in that city regarding a child in medical distress. Officers arrived within minutes and found the 5-year-old boy unconscious with severe injuries requiring immediate medical care. The boy was first taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital and later airlifted by medical helicopter to a San Diego County hospital where he remained in a coma for several months.

The victim, who was considered to be in grave condition when first found by police, is no longer hospitalized and is undergoing physical therapy.

The case, SWF1707576, was prosecuted by Deputy DA Jennifer Garcia.

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