

West Sentenced To Life Plus 15 Years For Murder

By SUE STERLING
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Lorenzo West, convicted in December of second-degree murder and armed criminal action for the fatal stabbing of Jeffrey Coulter on Jan. 1, 2005, was sentenced Wednesday morning to life in prison plus 15 years on the charges.

The stabbing occurred during a fight at a New Year's party at a residence near Blairstown in rural Johnson County.

West, 23, of Holden, made a tearful apology to Coulter's family before Circuit Judge Joseph Dandurand imposed the sentence during a hearing in Johnson County Circuit Court.

The hearing, which had been scheduled for next Monday in Cass County Circuit Court, where the case was moved on a change of venue, was returned to Johnson County for the convenience of witnesses and family members who also attended a preliminary hearing Wednesday afternoon on a co-defendant in the case.

Defense attorney John Picerno had asked Dandurand for leniency for West, but Dandurand said a lesser sentence would have sent the wrong message to other would-be wrong-doers that, "If you can make excuses, you deserve lesser punishment."

Johnson County Prosecuting Attorney Mary Ann Young had recommended life in prison on the murder charge and 20 years on the armed criminal action charge after several witnesses testified about prior incidents in which West either became violent or threatened violence against other persons.

Coulter's mother, Charlotte Keller, in an emotional victim impact statement delivered in a courtroom packed with members of Coulter's and West's family and friends, said her son "was in the process of living his dream" when a "senseless act of violence" ended that dream.

Stating Coulter was a "devoted daddy, husband, son, brother, uncle and friend," who lived his life "with joy and passion," she said, "He was an inspiration to all who knew him."

Coulter's sister, Michelle Keller, relating how she had watched her brother die in the hospital from the stab wound inflicted by West, said she lives with that picture every day, adding that it has caused her to become wary of other people and is keeping her from living a vibrant life and planning for the future.

She said all Coulter's family members have been impacted by the loss, including Coulter's children, who will grow up without knowing their father, and her own daughter, who will know her uncle only through pictures and shared memories.

An uncle, Eddie Osborne, told the court that he had seen Coulter "grow into a man I admired and loved," adding, "He desired to make the world a better place."

Stating the family has suffered "a sense of profound loss," Osborne said he has watched grief and sorrow wreak havoc on the lives of the family.

He said, "What happened in an instant has had a lifelong impact."

He urged Dandurand to impose the maximum penalty, stating that West has a "callous disregard for human life" and "has no place in civilized society."

Young said the incident "was not a fight. It was not a case of two individuals equally defending themselves from each other.... It was an attack."

She said West "stood at the fringes" until his victims were disabled and then he moved in to stab them. "He was waiting like a predator for people to show weakness," she said, noting Coulter "already was beaten into the ground" when West, who was leaving the scene, returned to stab him after stabbing two other per-

"He was just thirsting for blood," she said, noting he did not know his victims. "He killed a man just for fun and he deserves the maximum of life and 20 years."

Two character witnesses testified on West's behalf, including Shanna Gard, a special education teacher from Holden High School, who said West was in her class in his junior and senior years. "I found him to be a very trust-

worthy student," she said, adding he was "very respectful of students and staff" and had worked hard in the classroom.

West's uncle, Alfred Harris, an elder in an evangelical church in Kansas City, Kan., said West's mother had died on May 31, 2004, following a brief illness, and West, who had been pursuing a baseball career, returned to Holden.

He noted West "had no intentions of going to the party or taking a life or committing a crime" when his brother and his friends got him up off the couch where he had been sleeping to accompany them to the party.

"Everyone who participated ... made a terrible decision that day," Harris said, adding West "is very remorseful."

He said, "He's not a thug and he's not heartless. He understands he has committed a crime and he'll have to live with that the rest of his life."

Picerno noted that West had voluntarily gone to the sheriff's department and had confessed, stating that "anyone listening to the tape (of the confession) knows he's truly remorseful about what took place."

Stating the jury had convicted West of second-degree murder, instead of first-degree, Picerno said, "Twelve people objectively determined he did not coolly reflect upon the matter."

Picerno asked Dandurand to

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consider a sentence "at the lower end of the guidelines," noting he had no prior felony convictions and citing "the level of remorse and responsibility" he had expressed.

West, facing Coulter's family and friends in the courtroom, said he is "truly sorry," adding, "It should not have happened. You have every right to be mad at me."

He said he had not meant to kill Coulter. "I'm not that type of person." He said he will suffer for it the rest of his life.

Dandurand told West that the remarks the character witnesses made in his behalf "were not lost on me."

And he said, "There's plenty of responsibility to go around in Jeffery Coulter's death," which he said included "some of the people sitting in the seats today watching" the proceedings who had gotten West up to go with them to the party.

He said it was "just by the grace of God" that other people who took weapons to the party were not "sitting in your chair. It could have happened just as easily to somebody else."

But he said, ultimately, the choice was West's. "You chose to get out of bed and take a knife ... and participate in a fight with a knife. You chose to forcefully stab Jeffrey Coulter."

He said he feels the jury made the appropriate decision on the charge, adding a serious crime "calls for serious consequences."

Jeffrey Coulter was a 30-year-old man who was shot and killed by West on the night of the party. Coulter was a member of the same church as West and was a close friend of West's. Coulter was a member of the same church as West and was a close friend of West's.

Coulter's sister, Michelle Foster, relating how the fatal shooting occurred, said she was watching her brother die in the hospital from the stab wound inflicted by West and she lives with that picture every day, adding that it has caused her to become wary of other people and is keeping her from having a normal life and planning for the future.

She said all Coulter's family members have been impacted by the loss, including Coulter's children who will grow up without knowing their father and her own daughter, who will know her uncle only through pictures and shared memories. All uncle Eddie O'Brien, told the court that he had seen Coulter grow into a man, I shared and loved, adding he wanted to make the world a better place.

Stating the family has suffered "a sense of profound loss," O'Brien said he has watched West and "wishes West had not been on the lives of the family."

He said "What happened in an instant has had a lifelong impact."

He urged Dandurand to impose the maximum penalty, stating that West has a "callous disregard for human life" and "has no place in civilized society."

West said the incident "was not a fight. It was not a case of two individuals equally identifying themselves from each other. It was an attack."

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