

Hughes sentenced to state prison; appeal expected

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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THIS STORY HAS BEEN UPDATED.

LAKEPORT — A San Francisco man is facing more than four years in state prison after being sentenced for a burglary and assault with a firearm in a 2005 incident in Clearlake Park.

Renato Hughes Jr., 24, was sentenced Monday afternoon by Judge Arthur Mann.

He was convicted last month of burglary and assault with a firearm; at the same time, he was acquitted of two homicide counts he faced under the provocative act, and robbery and attempted murder charges, as Lake County News has reported. A charge of causing great bodily injury resulted in a hung jury.

The prosecution alleged that Hughes and two friends, Christian Foster and Rashad Williams, had broken into the Clearlake Park home of Shannon Edmonds and Lori Tyler in the early morning hours of Dec. 7, 2005, planning to steal Edmonds' medical marijuana.

Tyler's son, Dale Lafferty, then 17, was assaulted with a baseball bat and left with permanent brain injuries.

Mann said that, because of the violence of the burglary, he was sentencing Hughes to the upper term of six years in prison with a one-year enhancement for the burglary, plus another year for the assault charge, which was a mid-term sentence for that crime.

In all Hughes received an eight-year prison sentence, according to Mann. With time served and a 15-percent time credit, he should face just over four years in state prison.

Following the hearing, which lasted more than an hour, Hughes' attorneys, Stuart Hanlon and Sara Rief, said they expected Hughes to appeal the conviction and sentence.

Hughes' case has generated significant attention in the nearly three years it's been under way, in part because he was being tried for two homicides he didn't commit.

Edmonds shot Foster and Williams as they ran from his home but has never been charged. Hughes was charged with the murder under the provocative act doctrine, which held him responsible for the deaths because he was alleged to have taken part in a crime with a possible lethal result.

Hanlon had argued that Edmonds was a drug dealer and had killed the men in a drug deal gone wrong.

In making the sentencing decision, Mann considered a 22-page probation report, victim impact statements by Tyler and Lafferty's grandmother, Deborah Besley, and arguments by Hanlon and District Attorney Jon Hopkins.

Reading her statement before the court, Tyler thanked Hopkins for "bringing out the truth" of the case.

She said she didn't have feelings of hatred for Hughes but believed that, if one of the men involved had spoken up, the incident that led to her son's near-fatal beating and the deaths of Foster and Williams could have been avoided.

"Dale was a wonderful young man with a great future and everything going for him," she said.

Today, he has to have 24-hour daycare after suffering eight skull fractures during the incident. Tyler said he had to have surgery to remove part of his brain in order to survive.

"The counselor told me that I have lost my son," she said, adding when she took him home after his hospitalization, it was like bringing home a 170-pound infant.

She and Edmonds are no longer together, and she said she has trouble sleeping at night, sometimes getting up to check the doors and windows.

"You never dream that anything this horrible could ever happen to you," said Tyler, asking Mann for the strictest sentence.

Reading her statement, Besley said Hughes, Williams and Foster made the decision to take away her grandson's future.

"This is not a crime of race, this is a crime of burglary and assault," she said.

She asked Hughes, "Renato, do you have any idea what you have done to Dale and his family?" Hughes looked up at her from the defense table as she asked the question.

Besley said it costs \$48,000 a month to care for Lafferty at a special care home more than 400 miles away.

She, too, asked the court for the maximum sentence. "Why should you get all the opportunities that Dale will never get?" she said to Hughes.

As Besley was speaking, Hughes' sister, sitting in the audience, said, "He didn't do anything," which she repeated as Besley turned to return to her seat.

Hopkins relayed to the court a brief statement from Edmonds, who said he whole life was ruined as a result of the incident, adding it has impacted his 11-year-old daughter.

Edmonds was not present at the sentencing. On Saturday, he was arrested by Clearlake Police on a drunk and disorderly charge, but has since been released from jail, according to jail records.

The families of Foster and Williams are suing Edmonds and Tyler in federal court, a case expected to come to trial next year, as Lake County News has reported.

Prosecution, defense debate sentencing

Hughes himself took the chance to speak to the judge during the hearing, appealing to Mann's sense of fairness.

"I stand by my innocence in this whole ordeal," said Hughes, who noted he has been incarcerated for 33 months.

If he could give Lafferty back his life and bring back Foster and Williams, Hughes said he would.

He said he looks forward to having positive opportunities once he's released, including going to college and

becoming "a productive and contributing member of society."

He said he wouldn't continue to be degraded and humiliated by the accusations against him. "Only God can judge me."

Hughes said he looks forward to being home with his young daughter. Hanlon told Mann that he had objections to the probation report, and he also faulted Hopkins for statements he's made about the jury verdict in the media.

He said the fact that Hughes was acquitted of most of the charges keeps getting lost. "Those acquittals define the facts."

Hanlon said the jury found that Hughes was not responsible for Lafferty's injuries, and asked that the entire probation report be stricken due to its lack of impartiality.

Hopkins asserted that the facts of the case still remain, and then discussed previous convictions on Hughes' record. When the 2005 incident happened, Hughes was on probation for driving under the influence, said Hopkins. Hughes also has a conviction for having marijuana for sale. The probation officer who prepared the report for the sentencing interviewed Hughes, whose statements differ from those he made on the witness stand during the trial, said Hopkins. The report, he said, quoted Hughes as saying the police planted his blood in Edmonds' house to link him to the scene, "which is patently ridiculous," said Hopkins.

As Hopkins began to recount testimony Hughes gave in court, Hanlon said he objected to an attempt to retry the case. Mann overruled the objection.

Mann said he didn't consider Hughes' prior record significant. However, Williams and Foster inflicted significant injury during the incident, which Mann said demonstrated planning and professionalism. Hopkins asserted that the burglary was particularly brutal. "Someone had a shotgun, someone had a hammer, and a melee broke out."

Hanlon responded that Hughes' level of involvement, which was "some sort of aid and abet" and not the murders or use of the bat, called for no more than a midterm sentence with no enhancements, for a total of four years.

Mann said he gave no weight to the two homicides because the jury found Hughes not guilty and Edmonds was "integrally involved."

"I do find that there was great violence in this burglary," said Mann, which led him to conclude it merited the upper term.

After handing Hughes the sentence, Mann explained his right to appeal. The appeal must be filed with the Superior Court within 60 days.

He asked Hughes if he had any questions about the sentence. Hughes only responded, "At least I'm not getting life" — which is what he would have faced had he been convicted of the homicide charges.

Hopkins informed the court that he would not seek to retry Hughes on the single charge of assault causing great bodily injury, which had resulted in a hung jury.

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