

Mentally ill Bellingham man released hours after pleading guilty to attack on baby

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BELLINGHAM - A schizophrenic man who punched a stranger's baby in the head in downtown Bellingham was released from jail hours after pleading guilty to two felony assaults Thursday, Nov. 14.

Three weeks before Daniel Joshua Bravo, 28, of Bellingham, attacked the baby, a state psychologist ruled him competent to stand trial in another Whatcom County Superior Court case, a home burglary.

During a forensic evaluation, Bravo "did not present as an imminent danger to himself or others and could provide for his basic needs of health and safety," Dr. Julia McLawsen wrote in a report dated Nov. 28, 2012.

But by the afternoon of Dec. 16, Bravo was so mentally "messed up," he said in court this week, he remembers almost nothing and he can't even recall faces of the family he attacked at random on East Holly Street.

From a nearby table at Pita Pit, he had stared at the mother, father and their 4-month old son while they ate lunch. The family, visitors from Seattle, felt uncomfortable, but eventually Bravo left and they finished eating.

Afterward, they crossed street, the mother cradling the baby with his head poking over her shoulder. Bravo ran up from behind and punched the baby in the head.

The child nearly fell from his mother's arms and to the pavement, but she held on. The father took Bravo to the ground. Meanwhile the baby's nose bled and his face swelled, and firefighters loaded him into an ambulance on a backboard.

"The devil made me hit the kid," Bravo later told police.

Chief Criminal Deputy Prosecutor Eric Richey read a from the child's mother in court at Bravo's sentencing.

"This crime devastated us as a family. It has traumatized each and every one of us in some way," the mother wrote. "I have replayed the scene a thousand times over in my head, wishing we had gone to another place to eat, wishing I had held my son differently, so his head wasn't over my shoulder."

The boy had bruising and swelling but, so far, has shown no signs of permanent damage.

Court records show Bravo has a pattern of mental instability dating back to the age of 7, when he was first diagnosed with schizophrenia. More recently, records reveal:

- In a delusional rage, Bravo attacked a fellow mental health patient with a pen in September 2009 at Skagit Valley Care Center, believing the victim wanted to harm him.

- Bravo caused \$1,500 damage to a vent Aug. 12 at the Whatcom Count Jail work center where he was being held on a petty theft charge. According to charging papers, he climbed a fence and kicked the vent in an escape attempt, saying "he needed to see his doctor about his medication for voices inside his head and he got claustrophobic."

- He pleaded guilty in early December to second-degree malicious mischief for breaking a window to get into an apartment in south Bellingham. Officers found him scratched up, with "blackberry stains" on his back, carrying a fire extinguisher. "Off my meds," Bravo told police.

- He started a fire in his State Street apartment one day before the attack on the child, according to a claim filed in civil court. He later told a forensic health psychologist that he put clothes in the oven because he wanted to set off the smoke alarm. Sprinkler damage shuttered the business downstairs, Wise Buys, for more than a month.

- He put a Whatcom County correction's deputy into a headlock in a holding tank at the county jail in February 2013.

In May 2013, a state psychologist determined Bravo still showed obvious signs of mental illness.

But last week, after several more months of treatment, Whatcom County Superior Court Judge Charles Snyder approved an updated finding that Bravo could "currently understand" the charges against him. (The phrase "fully understand" has been crossed out in pen on official paperwork.)

Bravo pleaded guilty to two counts of third-degree felony assault, for the attack on the deputy and the attack on the baby. He was sentenced to a year in jail, but he has served that time already and walked a free man Thursday afternoon.

The sentence doesn't require any supervision from the Department of Corrections, nor does it force him to take medications.

Bravo had been charged with first-degree assault. Richey said he offered the plea deal because, if taken to trial, Bravo would have had a strong defense that he wasn't sane at the time the crimes were committed. So he wanted Bravo to at least have the felonies on his record.

"It was a terrible deal," Richey said. "But we were afraid we were going to get nothing. Even to get something feels like a victory."

Read more here: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2013/11/15/3317955/mentally-ill-bellingham-man-released.html#storylink=cpy>