

TACOMA NEWS TRIBUNE

ROB CARSON; STAFF WRITER

Published: March 16, 2013 at 2:36 a.m. PDT— **Updated:** March 16, 2013 at 2:38 a.m. PDT

Joseph Lester's murder sentence incites melee in courthouse

A flurry of fist fights broke out Friday on the second floor of the County-City Building moments after Pierce County Superior Court Judge Frank Cuthbertson handed down a 22-year sentence for Joseph Lester, convicted of second-degree murder for stabbing his pregnant girlfriend to death in 2011.

Emotions in a highly charged murder case spilled into the halls of the County-City Building in downtown Tacoma on Friday.

A flurry of fist fights broke out on the second floor of the courthouse moments after Pierce County Superior Court Judge Frank Cuthbertson handed down a 22-year sentence for Joseph Lester, convicted of second-degree murder for stabbing his pregnant girlfriend to death in 2011.

More than a dozen corrections officers and sheriff's deputies rushed to the scene to restore order, chasing people through the courthouse and shoving attorneys and family members to safety. At least three people were on the floor after the melee, though none appeared seriously injured.

Lester, 25, attacked Keisha Lewis, 21, outside a University Place duplex on Halloween 2011. Lewis died in her adoptive mother's arms shortly afterward in view of her 2-year-old son. Lester fled with the couple's 9-month-old daughter and later turned himself in to police.

Lester claimed self-defense, but the jury didn't find that credible. According to court testimony, Lewis stabbed Lester in the weeks before the fatal attack, sending him to trauma care with a severed artery in his thigh.

In tearful testimony at Friday's sentencing hearing, Lewis' mother, Sandra Barnes, said her family – and especially Lewis' children – had been permanently damaged by the killing.

“I have to hear my grandson say, “Grandma, I want to die and go to heaven so I can see my mama,” she said.

Lester’s father and a neighbor spoke for Lester, both saying he was a good person at heart.

“He was a good guy,” said neighbor William Turner. “He might have had mental health problems and might have struggled around the neighborhood, but he tried to get into college.”

Lester declined to speak when Cuthbertson gave him the opportunity. He showed no emotion during the sentencing or testimony.

Prosecutors urged Cuthbertson to send Lester to prison for 50 years, saying the facts that he was armed with a deadly weapon, knew Lewis was pregnant and that the murder was related to domestic violence warranted an exceptional sentence.

Lester’s attorney, Dino Sepe, sought a 20-year sentence. Cuthbertson instead delivered a sentence of 22 years, midway in the standard range – 16½-25 years — for the crime. “He snapped,” the judge said in explanation of his decision. “This killing was kind of out of character, I think, for Mr. Lester.”

After the hearing, Venus Dergan, the older daughter of the woman who raised Lewis, vehemently rejected that analysis.

“I don’t feel justice was served,” Dergan said. “This wasn’t just a snap thing. He beat the hell out of that girl.”

Defense attorney Sepe said he intends to file an appeal in the case.

rob.carson@thenewstribune.com 253-597-8693