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Jake Bacon

Former Flagstaff police detective Michael Gray, right, listens Friday to Judge Ted Reed sentence him to the maximum 20 years in prison for child molestation of his stepdaughter and adopted daughter. (Jake Bacon/Arizona Daily Sun)

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A retired Flagstaff police detective was sentenced to 20 years in prison Friday after being convicted previously on child molestation charges.

Michael Gray, 64, admitted to inappropriately touching his teenage stepdaughter and adopted daughter while working in law enforcement.

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The girls told Coconino County Superior Court Division 6 Judge Ted Reed that they came forward about the abuse, which had ended years earlier, to protect their younger siblings.

According to police reports, Gray would enter the girls' rooms individually and would then molest them. The abuse happened multiple times a week for years until the girls moved into the same bedroom.

"When I called the police, I did it to protect my 9-year-old sister, who I thought would have been his next victim," Gray's now 19-year-old stepdaughter told the court on Friday. "He adopted children under the guise of giving them a better life."

Instead, she said, he abused them sexually.

The defendant began work with the Flagstaff Police Department in 1981 and retired in 2003. He then went to work for the Arizona Department of Gaming.

Gray investigated charges similar to the ones of which he has been convicted while he was with the police department.

A grand jury indictment alleged that the crimes occurred while Gray worked for the Gaming Department.

According to the presentence report, when Gaming personnel came to pick up Gray's work truck following his arrest, they found a sex toy, baby oil and a photo of a young unidentified girl.

Gray pleaded guilty to one count of child molestation and one count of attempted child molestation earlier this spring as part of a plea deal with the Coconino County Attorney's Office.

The first count, a Class 2 felony and a dangerous crime against children, carried a mandatory 10 to 24 years in prison, but a plea agreement stipulated that an aggravated sentence be capped at 20 years.

PROUD OF HER DAUGHTERS

The victims' mother, who was married to Gray until her daughters told her about the abuse, outlined for the judge the extensive damage done to her family and how hard they had worked to recover afterward.

She also said that she was incredibly proud of her daughters for their choice to come forward, because it might have saved their younger siblings from similar abuse.

"The minute they decided to tell me, they switched from being victims to survivors," she said.

However, the mother said that there were other victims in the case that had not been discussed. Gray's two youngest children, who are not alleged to have been abused, were taken away from their mother by Child Protective Services for five days while the case was investigated.

"(My daughter) thought she had done something terribly wrong and that CPS was punishing them," she said.

Another child wet the bed for a year afterward because of the terror of that time away. The children also have difficulty trusting police officers, she said.

Overall, the victims' mother said that her kids were now excelling at life and that she was thankful she'd have the opportunity to watch them succeed, while her former husband spent his life in prison.

"I choose to live and love again on my own terms," she said.

The younger of the victims, said that the abuse was especially harsh on her. She had been adopted by the Gray family after suffering sexual abuse by another man.

"I've had two strikes against me since the day I was born," she said. "My grief ends today. I will put all the tears and the bad memories behind me."

ALCOHOLISM BLAMED

After giving a factual basis for his guilt earlier this spring, Gray had watered down his confession in an interview with a psychologist for his presentence report. Gray said he had been an alcoholic and that he didn't remember any abuse, so it could only have occurred if he was blacked out from drinking.

"It is difficult for me to believe I could be guilty of such things," Gray said, according to a pretrial services report. "However, I read the police reports and I do not believe a trial would result in me being acquitted of the charges."

The defendant said he took the plea deal in hopes of getting a lesser sentence from a judge.

Gray stepped back from those remarks on Friday, speaking directly to his estranged daughters instead of pleading with the judge for a more lenient sentence.

"There's no excuse for my actions, I know that," he said following an apology to his former family. "I had dealt with this type of behavior from other people and I found abhorrent and disgusting and that's how I would categorize this behavior."

"Forgiveness is something we all need at one time or another and I've never needed it more than I need it now," he added.

Gray tied the end of the abuse to when he got sober in 2006.

PROTECTOR ROLE ABUSED

Prosecutors asked the judge for an aggravated sentence because of the extreme harm to the victims and because Gray had abused his position of trust as a guardian. The defense had asked for a minimum sentence in hopes that Gray would not die in prison.

Judge Reed, who typically handles juvenile and drug cases, but took over the case after three judges recused themselves from proceedings, agreed with prosecutors.

Reed told the defendant that he thought an aggravated sentence was appropriate, considering the emotional and physical harm to the victims, as well as his abuse of his position of authority as the girls' guardian.

"Mr. Gray, I'm not quite sure how to weigh your background as a law enforcement officer," Reed said. "I think it's a double-edged sword. You were a protector of the community, but on the other hand, you were a protector of your family."

Reed gave the defendant the maximum sentence stipulated under the guidelines of the plea agreement.

If Gray survives his prison term, which both attorneys told the court was unlikely, he will spend the remainder of his natural life on probation as a registered sex offender for his conviction on the second count.

"The court's finding of aggravation in the defendant's status as a stepparent is significant," Coconino County Attorney David Rozema said following sentencing. "Step and foster children are especially vulnerable to those in positions of trust who choose to exploit them."

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