



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Cooper Sentenced to Two Life Sentences in Prison

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. – Greene County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Patterson announces that Johnny Lee Cooper, 30, of Springfield, Missouri was sentenced Friday, 10/18/2019, for a total of two life sentences for his convictions for ten counts of statutory rape in the first degree, attempted statutory sodomy in the first degree, and statutory sodomy in the first degree. The defendant had previously been convicted following a jury trial before the Honorable Thomas Mountjoy.

At trial, the defendant's victims, three sisters now aged 19, 15, and 9, testified against the defendant. The jury heard evidence from the victims themselves and through recorded forensic interviews done at the Child Advocacy Center about the sexual abuse they endured at the hands of the mother's boyfriend. The oldest victim testified that the abuse went on for approximately eight years. The 15 year old victim testified her abuse went on for over two years. The older two victims also testified that they denied that the sexual abuse was occurring, even upon direct questioning, and even recanted their initial disclosures of abuse. They, however, testified that they denied and recanted their disclosures because they tried to tell their mother and their mother didn't believe them, the victims didn't think anyone would believe them since their mother didn't believe them, that they were scared of the defendant because they had witnessed him be violent toward their mother and because the defendant had been physically abusive to them, and that they did not believe that their mother would ever protect them because their mother was regularly using methamphetamine and showed them she was going to choose the defendant over her daughters. The oldest victim further testified that she consistently kept the abuse quiet because she felt that telling might cause the defendant to focus his attention away from her and toward her sisters and she had an obligation to protect her sisters. She detailed how guilty and shameful she felt about the abuse describing how she couldn't look at herself in the mirror, could

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not sleep, and felt “disgusting” inside. The State also highlighted that the victims first disclosed while the defendant was in jail for domestic assault for being violent with one of the victims and her mother. The victims’ mother went to court to have the defendant released from jail and twenty days after that, the victims recanted their initial disclosure. The State argued that the recantation only occurred once the defendant was out of jail and the victims no longer felt safe or protected from him. The victims all finally reaffirmed their previous disclosures of sexual abuse when they were all taken from their mother’s custody and placed in foster care ensuring that they would no longer have contact with the defendant.

The jury also heard from three forensic interviewers from the Child Advocacy Center who testified that false denials and false recantations (i.e. that the abuse occurred and victims are lying to cover up the abuse) are common for children who are sexually abused. They explained that a child disclosing abuse will go through a process that includes denial, tentative disclosures, active disclosure, recantation, and reaffirmation. They testified that an unsupportive non-offending caregiver, a victim’s relationship to an abuser, violence in the home, if victims feel unsupported or unsafe, fear of not being believed, feelings of guilt and shame associated with sexual abuse, and fear of the offender can all cause a victim to falsely deny or falsely recant abuse that is occurring.

At sentencing, each victim wrote a victim impact statement detailing the aftermath of the abuse. One victim wrote that she was hoping that the sentencing would put her mind at ease and the pain she endured made her tougher and that she can overcome anything because she overcame this. Another victim wrote that she felt that the trial would allow her live her life without feeling like the defendant is following her around and she wouldn’t be surrounded by darkness anymore.

After listening to the victims’ statements and hearing arguments from the State and the defense, Judge Mountjoy adopted the State’s recommendation and sentenced the defendant to a life sentence on each count, running the counts involving the oldest victim consecutive to the counts involving the younger victim, for a total of two consecutive life sentences in the Missouri Department of Corrections.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant Prosecuting Attorneys Stephanie Wan and Paul Rebar. It was investigated by the Springfield Police Department and Detective Annesha Umbarger, Special Agent Joshua Morrow, and Detective Cody Williams were the lead investigators assigned to the case.

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