



Historical Media Coverage

Kenneth Hansen: guilty again

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Kenneth Hansen made a last-ditch effort at his sentencing hearing Oct. 1 to convince Cook County Criminal Court Judge Mary Ellen Coughlin that he had nothing to do with the 1955 murders of three young Northwest Side Chicago boys.

Hansen, wearing a tan jail uniform, stood up and said, "I would not, I could not, I did not kill those children."

He insisted that the case was built on a foundation of "stories" coming from four informants who were only looking out for their own interests.

As soon as he sat down Coughlin described the Oct. 14, 1955 murders — of

brothers Anton (Tony) Schuessler, 11, and John Schuessler, 13, and their friend Robert Peterson, 13 — as one of the most horrific crimes in Chicago history. She said the devastation wrought by Hansen is immeasurable.

Coughlin said there is nothing that the court can ever do to bring back the three boys. But, she stressed, she had the power to ensure that Hansen never has the opportunity to prey on young children for the rest of his life.

With that, Coughlin sentenced Hansen to not less than 200 years and not more than 300 years in prison for each of the three boys. She said the sentences are to run concurrently.

Hansen was found guilty in a retrial on Aug. 18. He was first convicted in 1963 and received the same jail terms.

The first conviction was thrown out by the Illinois Appellate Court in 2000, but Hansen was not released from prison. He was ordered held in custody on a \$3 million bond.

Before Hansen's sentencing hearing began last week his attorney Leonard Goodman argued a motion for a new trial. He accused the prosecution of using "every dirty trick in the book."

Goodman said Assistant State's Attorney Scott Cassidy tried the hijack the jury's sympathy by telling jurors to send a message of hope to the families of all murdered children, whose cases are as yet unresolved, by finding Hansen guilty. Goodman criticized Cassidy for telling the jury that Hansen must be guilty because he did not put up a strong defense.

Evidence lost

"Almost all of the witnesses who could have exonerated Mr. Hansen are dead," he said. "There is no chance that science will ever free Mr. Hansen, because the state destroyed all of the physical evidence."

He said the prosecution deliberately led Joseph Piemmons, one of four witnesses who came forward to testify against Hansen, to believe that Hansen murdered his ex-wife Beverly in 1989. Cook County Medical Examiner's Office records show she committed suicide.

Goodman called Hansen's son Mark to the stand to ask him details of the death of his mother. He testified that

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his father called him three times from a restaurant looking for Beverly Hansen.

Mark Hansen said his father called a fourth time to announce that he had found his former spouse dead at her south suburban home. Mark said his father instructed him to go to Beverly Hansen's residence with a pocket knife and lie to police, to tell officers that he found her hanging and cut her down.

Kenneth Hansen left Beverly's home shortly after making the telephone call. Mark explained that his father did not stay to talk to police because he cannot handle himself well in difficult situations.

Goodman acknowledged that the murder of the three boys was a heinous crime, but said Hansen is not the man who did it. He said the entire case against Hansen is based on the fabricated testimony of paid informants.

Belated suspect?

Beginning in 1993, each of the four main prosecution witnesses — William Wernette, Herb Hollatz, Roger Spry and Piemmons — told investigators that Hansen had admitted killing the boys. At both trials Spry and Hollatz testified that they had sexual relations with Hansen. Spry said he was 11 or 12 when Hansen first molested him. Goodman added that Hansen was never a suspect until 40 years after the boys' bodies were found.

Coughlin commended Goodman for doing everything he could to defend his client, but denied his motion for a new trial without hesitation. She said there was no factual basis for his arguments and he relied on baseless rumors and unfounded accusations of misconduct. After the prosecution finished calling a number of witnesses during the sentencing hearing, Karen Kujawa, daughter-in-law of Elenor Schuessler Kujawa, the Schuessler boys' mother, took the stand. Elenor's first husband, Anton Schuessler, died shortly after their sons were killed, and she married Valentine Kujawa a year later.

Cries for justice

Karen Kujawa read a victim-impact state-

ment written by Elenor Kujawa's sister, Beatrice Blane. In the letter Blane wrote, "My nephews died at the hands of an animal."

Blane stated that Hansen put a fear into the family that continues to this day. She wrote that her sister, who died in 1986, went to her grave crying out for justice.

When Karen Kujawa reached the end of the letter, Hansen got up from his chair and blurted out, "I didn't do it!"

Goodman called his sole witness, Mark Hansen, to the stand to testify on behalf of his father. He left the glass-enclosed courtroom and walked into the audience area to ask Mark if he wished to make a statement. The younger Hansen declined.

Assistant State's Attorney Tom Biesty said Kenneth Hansen "cheated the hangman's noose" and asked Coughlin to "let your justice shine on these three angels."

Kenneth Hansen tried to convince Coughlin of his innocence before the judge issued the sentence. Insisting he "would not, could not and did not" murder Robert Peterson and the Schuessler brothers, Hansen said that he was in Mexico or Texas on his honeymoon at the time they were killed. Hansen said he owned a stable in the south suburbs and had no reason to be at the Idle Hours Stables, Higgins and East River Road, where prosecutors said the murders took place.

Referring to the testimony of the four main prosecution witnesses, he said, "If I were you listening to all those stories, I would hate me too."

Following the hearing, Karen Kujawa and other family members spoke to reporters in the lobby of the Cook County Criminal Courts Building, 2000 S. California Ave.

"We're very happy with the judge's decision today," she said. "That was a very important thing for all of us, to make sure that he is never outside again. For 47 years we've all had to worry about this man being out there someplace, and maybe even hurting our children. Now he can't."

Goodman said he plans to appeal. He said Hansen is disappointed with the sentence and is determined to keep fighting for his innocence.