

LOCAL NEWS

Preacher Sentenced to 4 to 6 Years for Abusing 7-Month-Old Boy

Posted January 18, 2000

RALEIGH — Despite a tearful plea for leniency, evangelist Howard Hunichen was sentenced Thursday to 4 to 6 years in prison for abusing then 7-month-old Zachary Fortner. The judge imposing the sentence said that he wished he could have imposed a harsher sentence.

Hunichen, 37, was convicted Wednesday on one count of felony child abuse and two counts of assault for stomping, shaking and beating Zachary in a daily disciplinary regimen that left the baby with permanent brain damage.

"I never intentionally tried to hurt that boy," Hunichen told the court. "When they told me this boy had broken bones, I couldn't believe it."

But the tearful plea did not result in a lighter sentence. "Your actions have sentenced that poor child to a life in prison -- in a crippled body," Judge Henry Hight said. "In a real sense, you murdered him ... Your sentence will not be enough."

The jury's guilty verdicts were returned shortly after 5 p.m. Wednesday, about two hours after jury deliberations began.

Prosecutors say Howard Hunichen, a street and Internet preacher known to followers as "Brother Howard," nearly shook Zachary Fortner to death last spring.

The child suffered permanent brain damage, skull, pelvic and other fractures.

Jurors interviewed by WRAL-TV5 News said some of the strongest evidence presented during the five-day trial were videotapes showing Zachary before and after the Fortners moved in with Hunichen, as well as the 911 call for medical help.

Both the prosecution and defense rested their cases Friday and made closing arguments to the jury today.

Hunichen did not testify during his trial.

Prosecutors say Hunichen had an almost God-like power over Lisa and Kevin Fortner, and maybe that is why they allowed him to be the primary caretaker for their three children, including Zachary.

Hunichen says Zachary fell off the bed during a diaper change and hit his head on the floor, but prosecutors argued that the severe injuries are inconsistent with a simple fall.

"He was in shock," said Dr. Michael Cinnamon, an emergency room physician at WakeMed. "He had no clinical evidence of life other than taking a deep breath every once and a while."

Kevin and Lisa Fortner also were charged with felony child abuse. They testified against Hunichen, with Lisa Fortner claiming that he raped her. They are expected to receive lighter sentences after pleading guilty later this week or next.

The Fortners and their three young children left their home in Waverly, Tenn., to move in with Hunichen last year. and wire reports

 Looking for comments?

CREDITS

Reporter Len Besthoff

Web Editor [John Conway](#)

Copyright 2011 by Capitol Broadcasting Company. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.