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PRESS RELEASE

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District Man Sentenced to 50-Year Prison Term for First Degree Felony Murder of 21-Month-Old Boy - Man Was on Parole For Another Attack Involving a Child -

WASHINGTON - Jonathan M. Austin, 35, was sentenced today to 50 years of incarceration on charges of first degree felony murder with aggravating circumstances and first degree child cruelty in the death of a 21-month-old boy, U.S. Attorney Ronald C. Machen Jr. announced.

Austin, of Washington, D.C., was convicted by a jury in November 2010 following a trial in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. He was sentenced today by the Honorable Judge Jennifer Anderson to 50 years in prison for the murder charge and six years on the child cruelty charge, with the sentences running concurrently. Upon completion of his sentence, Austin is to be placed on five years of supervised release.

According to evidence presented at trial, on November 16, 2008, at approximately 3:30 p.m., Ronjai Butler, 21 months old, arrived at the emergency room of Howard University Hospital in full cardiopulmonary arrest. Efforts to revive him were futile.

Subsequently, it appeared that the child had suffered multiple bruises to the head and body. A full autopsy was performed by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. It determined that Ronjai had suffered multiple bruises and contusions. He also suffered a depressed skull fracture of the left side of his head. It also was determined that he had suffered multiple rib fractures and laceration to the lungs, liver, spleen, and kidneys. The cause of death was blunt force trauma to the head that resulted in brain swelling and death. The death was ruled a homicide.

An investigation revealed that Austin had been left alone with Ronjai and the boy's 3 ½-year-old sister while the mother and an older sibling went to the grocery store. The defendant is not related to any of the children and was the mother's boyfriend. When the mother returned to her apartment on North Capitol Street NW, she found Ronjai semi-conscious. Austin claimed that nothing happened and put Ronjai in the bathtub and splashed cold water on him.

At trial, Austin claimed that the child was chronically ill and died of natural causes.

At the time of Ronjai's death, Austin was on parole for another crime against a child. He was convicted of first degree cruelty and aggravated assault charges stemming from the scalding of a six-month-old girl, the daughter of another woman with whom Austin was having a relationship. That crime took place in October 1998 in another apartment on North Capitol Street. The victim, who was hospitalized for one month, still carries scars from that incident. Austin was sentenced in June 1999 to a prison term of 5 to 15 years and released on parole in February 2006. One condition of his parole was that he not have any contact with minor children.

In announcing today's sentence, U.S. Attorney Machen praised the investigative efforts of Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) Detectives Robert Jackson, Carlos Hilliard, Harbin Combee, Kim Lawrence, Gina Powell, and Sergeant Robert Parker, all of the Homicide Special Victims Unit at the time of the offense. He also cited the efforts of MPD Evidence Technicians Officer Jay Gregory, Officer John Holder and Officer George Klein of the Forensic Services Division.

In addition, Mr. Machen praised those who worked on the case from the U.S. Attorney's Office, including Marcia Rinker of the Victim Witness Assistance Unit, Paralegal Specialists Sandra Lane and Sharon Newman, and Assistant U.S. Attorney John Soroka, who prosecuted the case.

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