



Tuesday, December 8, 2020

## Cleveland Couple Sentenced to 15 and 8 Years in Prison for Causing Death of Four-Year-Old Godson

CLEVELAND – Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Michael C. O'Malley announced that Romaine Tolbert, 38, was sentenced to 15 years in prison after a jury convicted him on charges for causing the death of his wife's four-year-old godson. His wife, Joanne Vega, 33, was sentenced to 8 years in prison for her involvement in the death.

"This community has seen too many senseless homicides of innocent children," said Prosecutor O'Malley. "We hope that the victim's family can take some solace in today's sentence as justice for Eliazar has prevailed."

In March 2015, the victim's mother, who was preparing to serve a term of incarceration, dropped the victim off at Vega's house so she could care for him. After her release from prison in 2016, she last saw her son at a Fourth of July party. Between then and June 2017, Vega and Tolbert denied multiple requests by the victim's mother and other family members to see the child before the victim's family reported the child as missing.

On September 20, 2017, the Cleveland Division of Police (CPD) and Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's Office (CCMEO) responded to a backyard of a vacant house, located near Longmead Avenue and West 130th Street in Cleveland, where human remains were found in a plastic bag. The CCMEO conducted an autopsy that revealed the remains belonged to a small child. They ruled the cause of death as a homicide and noted the victim had suffered fractures to both arms. Due to severe decomposition, an identity of the child was unable to be made so CCMEO investigators contacted a Kent State University anthropology professor to create a forensic sketch to help identify the body.

In December 2017, the sketch was released to media outlets and several weeks later the victim's mother contacted CPD stating the drawing looked like her missing son. Subsequent DNA testing by the CCMEO matched the mother to the remains confirming the identity of the victim as her four-year-old son.

The investigation led by CPD's Homicide Unit connected Vega and Tolbert to the crime through phone records, email, social media accounts, and other witness testimony. Both fled the state after arrest warrants were issued upon indictment. On March 29, 2019, the U.S. Marshals arrested them in Adrian, Michigan and they were extradited to Cuyahoga County.

Vega pleaded guilty to the following charges:

- **One count of Involuntary Manslaughter**
- **One count of Endangering Children**
- **One count of Tampering With Evidence**
- **One count of Gross Abuse Of A Corpse**

A jury found Tolbert guilty of the following charges:

- **One count of Involuntary Manslaughter**
- **One count of Kidnapping**
- **One count of Endangering Children**
- **One count of Tampering With Evidence**
- **One count of Gross Abuse Of A Corpse**

Tolbert and Vega were sentenced to 15 and 8 years in prison, respectively.