

Hurst gets 25 years to life for murder

By Denise Nix Staff Writer

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Three years and five days after he beat his stepfather with a dumbbell, kicked him and stabbed him six times in the neck, Ashton Hurst was sentenced Wednesday to 25 years to life in prison.

With his wrists shackled to his waist, Hurst, 36, showed no reaction during the proceeding in Torrance Superior Court, even when his stepfather's brother spoke directly to him.

In the months before Hurst killed Robert Gauci on Feb. 8, 2005, Gauci, 44, spoke often to his brother about his county job, the baseball players he coached at Harbor College and real estate projects he shared with his wife, Thomas Gauci said.

"You have taken away my brother and my friend," he told Hurst.

But the eldest of three brothers added that he would not let anger, resentment and bitterness overcome him, because then Hurst will have taken his life, too.

"Therefore, I have forgiven you for the murder of my brother," Gauci added.

Judge Francis Hourigan on Wednesday denied Hurst a new trial or a reduced sentence. He also refused to consider a declaration signed by one of the jurors who convicted Hurst. The juror wrote he voted guilty because he was "not strong" and went along with the rest of the group.

Defense attorney Henry Salcido argued the juror did not follow the law.

But the judge sided with Deputy District Attorney Jeff Stodel, who argued that the internal or mental processes a juror experiences in deliberations cannot be considered as evidence in a motion for a new trial.

Hourigan also rejected Salcido's contention that the judge erred in at least 60 evidentiary rulings before and during the trial, which ended with Hurst's Dec. 14 first-degree murder conviction.

Hurst, who has a history of mental illness, testified he killed Gauci because he believed Gauci was making a sexual advance in a bedroom of their Torrance home in the 2200 block of 232nd Street.

The prosecution argued to the jury that Gauci was fed up with his troublesome, drug-using stepson "freeloading" off him and his wife.

Hurst's mother, Melba Gauci, at first didn't believe her son's claims. She now supports him, though.

At least part of the reason for her change of mind is the information that Salcido repeatedly tried to get before the jury.

About a dozen items - including alleged homosexual e-mail correspondences of Gauci's, and condoms and sex toys found in his truck - could have been used as evidence to support Hurst's testimony, Salcido argued Wednesday.

"The heart of our defense was that Mr. Gauci was leading at least a double, if not a triple, life," Salcido said. "It was absolutely crucial to us that this jury should have known that this was the case."

Stodel said the defense is trying to blame everyone and anyone else for the guilty verdict, when the only person who did anything wrong is Hurst.

Salcido said Hurst will appeal the conviction and sentence.

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