

Metro

Day-care center owner gets 4 years for shooting her husband

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A woman was sentenced Friday to four years in prison for shooting and wounding her husband in a luxury hotel in D.C. last summer after confronting him about allegations that he had sexually abused children at the Maryland day care she owned.

Sometimes through tears, 50-year-old Shanteari Weems told a D.C. Superior Court judge how she relied on her husband for security for herself and the children at her Owings Mills, Md., day-care center, Lil Kidz Kastle. She said she was floored to learn of the abuse allegations against him, as she considered the children like her own.

"I was supposed to protect those children, and my husband was supposed to help me protect those kids. I felt so much guilt," she said. "He was the person I chose to love and trust, and he turned out to be the one who kids needed protecting against."

But of the shooting, she added: "I wish I had done things differently and allowed the legal system to take care of things."

Federal prosecutors asked Judge Michael O'Keefe to sentence Weems to two years in prison as part of a November deal in which Weems pleaded guilty to aggravated assault and carrying a pistol without a license. But the judge, a former defense attorney, said that recommendation was "too light," noting that the crime was "premeditated."

"We live in a society of laws, and we can't act upon our emotion," O'Keefe said. "We have to let the justice system do its job. We can't say, 'Ooh yeah, he was a child molester, he deserved what he got.' We can't send that message to the community. He'll suffer the consequences if the facts in the case are supported. But what has happened, you have turned yourself into a criminal as well."

The hearing was attended by about 50 supporters of Weems and those who had gone through her day-care center and were now adults. Federal prosecutors presented evidence they said demonstrated the July shooting at the then-Mandarin Oriental Hotel was planned - and not a spontaneous response to Weems's learning of the allegations against her husband that very day.

Assistant U.S. Attorney LaVater Massie-Banks told the judge that on July 18, days before the shooting, a child protective services employee told Weems her husband was facing accusations of sexually assaulting children at his wife's day care.

Investigators had begun exploring the abuse allegations and had filed paperwork seeking a warrant to search Lil Kidz Kastle, as well as the van that Weems's husband drove to transport children to school, prosecutors said. On July 20, prosecutors said, authorities ordered the day-care center to shut down and revoked its license. That night, Weems drove to the Mandarin and stayed overnight with her husband, who was working a private security job in D.C. for the National Urban League Convention.

On July 21, after her husband left the hotel room and went to work, Weems drove back to Maryland,

authorities said. But she headed back to D.C. later that afternoon, and began texting family and friends telling them that she loved them.

"I told my husband if this is something he did, I am going to kill him and kill myself," said one of the messages. "I need answers."

Weems shot her husband twice later that day, in the neck and leg. James S. Weems Jr., 57, survived and was later charged by Baltimore County authorities in connection with the abuse of multiple children. He has pleaded not guilty, and the case is scheduled for trial in May. His attorney did not respond to messages seeking comment and has said previously he would not discuss the case.

The text messages, prosecutors insist, showed that Shanteari Weems was not acting out of blind rage, having just learned of her husband accusations.

"This is not a case in which Mrs. Weems just found out about this," Massie-Banks said, though she added: "The government believes she was overcome with emotion. One can only imagine what she was thinking, that her husband potentially molested children at her day care."

Shanteari Weems's attorney, Tony Garcia, argued that the breaking point for his client was when Weems was confronted on the morning of the shooting by a child's mother, who claimed James Weems had abused her son in the day-care center's van. He said Weems had previously dismissed the allegations because the day-care center had cameras in every room, but she realized the van did not.

Garcia said Weems, who had not drunk alcohol since 2006, started drinking. She grabbed her 9mm handgun, for which she has a license in Maryland, and drove back to the hotel to confront her husband, Garcia said.

"She felt betrayed. Her emotions were so high," Garcia said. The attorney asked the judge to sentence his client to time served and probation. Weems has been in the D.C. jail since the shooting, and has cooperated with Baltimore County authorities in the child sexual assault charges against her husband, Garcia said.

In court Friday, Weems said she had previously worked for nearly 12 years as a correctional officer in a Baltimore prison. She said she saw inmates getting increasingly younger, and opened the day-care center in the early 2000s to help give kids a sense of direction.

"Their parents trusted me," she said. "They knew I wouldn't do anything different for their children that I wouldn't do for my own. It wasn't just a business. We truly cared for our children."