

NEWS RELEASE

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Testimonies of three survivors of sexual assault lead to life sentence for serial rapist

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Three brave survivors courageously took the stand recently and their testimonies, which resulted in the conviction of LJ Bertha, a serial rapist in cold cases from 1993 and 1994, helped prosecutors ensure justice and protect the community. The trial was held during a recent trial session which was led by the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Felony Special Victims Team. The Misdemeanor Appeals Team also concluded a recent trial session.

The Felony Special Victims Team's trial session began on May 20, 2024 and concluded yesterday with Bertha's sentencing. The proceedings were held in courtrooms 5110, 5150, and 5170 before The Honorable Peter B. Knight and The Honorable J. Thomas Davis, Superior Court Judges. The Misdemeanor Appeals Trial Session began on June 3, 2024 and was held in courtroom 5350 before The Honorable Donnie Hoover, Superior Court Judge.

LJ Bertha, 64, was tried for 1) three counts of first-degree rape, 2) two counts of first-degree kidnapping, 3) two counts of attempted first-degree sex offense, and 4) common law robbery. The jury found Bertha *guilty* of 1) one count of first-degree rape, 2) one count of the lesser-included offense of second-degree rape, 3) one count of first-degree kidnapping, 4) one count of the lesser-included offense of second-degree kidnapping, 5) the lesser-included offense of attempted second-degree sex offense, and 6) common law robbery. The jury found him *not guilty* of one count of first-degree rape and one count of attempted first-degree sex offense. Sentencing him under laws that were in place at the time of the offenses, Judge Knight sentenced Bertha to life in prison with the possibility of parole after 20 years for the first-degree rape conviction and an additional 33 years in prison for the remaining charges to run consecutive to the first-degree rape sentence.

On October 12, 1993, a victim was parked in a shopping center parking lot off Freedom Drive when Bertha kicked in her driver's side window and forced her to move over to let him drive. He drove her to a dead end road and raped her while threatening to kill her. Bertha then drove her back to the parking lot, where the victim located help and the police arrived. Bertha was located nearby at the time by police. Serological testing was done at the time to confirm the presence of semen, but DNA testing conducted in 2023 confirmed Bertha as the suspect.

Then, on July 30, 1994, a second victim was walking on Beatties Ford Road when Bertha approached her and forced her to a dead end road. He then raped her while he was armed with a box cutter. The victim escaped and ran to a nearby convenience store, where the clerk called police. Serological testing was done to confirm the presence of semen, but DNA testing conducted in 2023 identified Bertha as the suspect in this case.

The survivors in both of those cases bravely testified during the trial as did a third survivor. She was raped by Bertha in November of 1996. He was convicted for that crime in 1997 and served 20 years in prison.

Prosecutors would like to thank those who helped secure justice in this case, including the survivors and cold case investigators, as well as those who were initially involved in the cases.

Michael Frieda, 50, was tried for 1) first-degree rape, 2) three counts of first-degree sexual offense, and 3) first-degree kidnapping. The jury found him *not guilty* on three counts of first-degree sexual offense and indicated to the court that they were unable to come to a unanimous verdict on the remaining charges. As a result Judge Davis declared a mistrial.

Nari Wilder, 40, was tried for assault by strangulation and simple assault. A jury found her *not guilty*.

Murice House, 40, pled guilty to 1) assault on a female and 2) misdemeanor breaking or entering. Judge Davis sentenced him to 150 days in jail; that sentence was suspended pending his completion of 18 months of supervised probation. As a condition of his probation, House must attend a certified batterers intervention program and have no contact with the victim in this case.

The Misdemeanor Appeals Team prosecutes cases in which the defendant was convicted in District Court, and then appeals his or her conviction to Superior Court for a jury trial as allowed under North Carolina law. During their trial session:

Latoya Benton, 28, was tried for 1) misdemeanor child abuse and 2) contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The jury found her *guilty* as charged. Judge Hoover sentenced her to 30 days in jail; that sentence was suspended pending her completion of 12 months of supervised probation. The probation will become unsupervised upon her completion of a certified parenting class.

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