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Man gets 25-50 years for shooting at Coatesville policemen

by Michael Rellahan
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WEST CHESTER >> Before sentencing the man convicted of firing gunshots at two Coatesville police officers to a prison term that could keep him behind bars well into his old age, a Common Pleas Court judge on Thursday bemoaned how the defendant had smeared the city as well as threatened the lives of the officers.

“You have repeatedly let down the community,” Judge Patrick Carmody told Andre Emmet “Needles” Fiorentino as a standing-room courtroom filled with city police officers and members of the Chester County District Attorney’s Office sat and listened. “You have been in and out of

jail like it's a revolving door."

"I have a great respect for the citizens of Coatesville," Carmody said in his 15-minute long lecture to Fiorentino. "I think it gets a bad rap ... because of the actions of a few." He said that evidence showed Fiorentino chose to leave his home and his family the night of the shooting and "put the people who live and work in that city in danger."

Reciting Fiorentino's criminal history dating back to his teenage years, Carmody said the defendant was someone who could not control his impulse to commit violent crimes, mainly armed robbery. "You have had a number of chances and you've tossed them aside to go out and terrorize the community. We can't tolerate people shooting at police."

Calling Coatesville police the "soldiers on the home front" who protect the community, Carmody said that Fiorentino had by firing at them during a street stop in November 2013, "made the community a dangerous place. That is a crying shame."

Carmody sentenced Fiorentino, 34, of Coatesville to 25 to 50 years in state prison, on the charges of felony aggravated assault on police officers and three weapons charges. He said he had tailored the sentence so that Fiorentino would "no longer be a threat to society" when he is freed.

Both of the officers that Fiorentino was found guilty of firing the revolver was illegally carrying spoke at the hour-long sentencing hearing in the county Justice Center. Detective Joseph Thompson and Officer Ryan Corcoran asked Carmody to sentence Fiorentino to the maximum term allowable, which was 35 to 70 years. They said the events of the night they were attacked had had a long lasting impact on their lives and careers.

"I will relive that night for all the time I work in Coatesville," said Thompson, who said that as a longtime officer he had been in life-or-death situations previously but none that compared to Fiorentino's attack. He said he felt Fiorentino had tried to make him the villain in the case rather than the victim, and had "played the system" to get a monetary reward.

"I want the defendant, and any other criminal to think twice before they attempt to shoot another officer," Thompson told Carmody.

Corcoran, who had only served a few weeks as an officer in Coatesville when the shooting occurred, told the judge he had never dreamed he would be involved in an attack such as Fiorentino's. "I had hoped that I would never have to use my weapon," said the military veteran of wars in the Middle East. "But I felt like I was in a fight for my life."

He urged Carmody to sentence Fiorentino to a lengthy sentence "to let other officers know that the judicial process will always be there for them."

The case pitted the prosecution's contention that Fiorentino had fired multiple shots at the two officers after they attempted to stop and question him as he walked along a street in the city's East End, with the defense's claim that the officers had overreacted and fired at Fiorentino without justification, mistaking a cell phone he had pulled from a pocket for a weapon.

The jury that heard the case during a week-long trial in June rejected the defense suggestion and found Fiorentino guilty on various counts of aggravated assault and weapons offenses. Carmody, in his comment before imposing the prison term on Fiorentino, said he considered the evidence against Fiorentino — including taped telephone conversations from Chester County Prison in which he implicated himself in the crime — overwhelming.

The shooting took place about 1 a.m. on Nov. 23, 2013 when Fiorentino was stopped walking along a dimly lighted stretch of the 700 block of Merchant Street, where he lived with his mother. Testimony showed that he had left his house moments before encountering Thompson and Corcoran, who were on patrol together that night, telling his son he was going to the store.

Thompson testified that he had seen Fiorentino walking along the sidewalk, but that he acted suspiciously, ducking down behind a car at the time he spotted the officers. Evidence showed that Fiorentino was on parole at the time of the encounter and that he had two handguns in his sweatpants — a violation of his release.

Thompson and Corcoran attempted to stop and question him, but Fiorentino turned and ran. When Thompson threatened to Taser him, Fiorentino turned and drew a revolver on them, firing at each. The officers returned fire, hitting him multiple times in the abdomen, thigh, knee, buttocks and back in the incident. He lost a kidney in the shooting, but has otherwise fully recovered.

As laid out by Carmody, Fiorentino's criminal record extends back to 1997, when he was still a juvenile. He was arrested and charged with robbery when he was 16 years old, and was sentenced to state prison as an adult. He later served a six to 12 years sentence for an armed robbery, and then did three to 12 months for a harassment charge in 2011. He had been out of prison only nine months when the shooting occurred.

Deputy District Attorney Carlos Barraza, who prosecuted the case with Assistant District Attorney Cynthia Morgan, said Fiorentino's failure to rehabilitate himself over the years showed that he was simply, "a cold blooded thug."

"He's been a cold blooded thug his entire adult life," Barraza said in his presentation to the court, adding that he would likely not change. "He is a thug for life, and he deserves to spend the rest of his life in prison. Coatesville deserves better than Andre Fiorentino." Barraza had asked Carmody to sentence Fiorentino to 65 to 110 years in prison, although Carmody later determined that the maximum he could imprison him for was 35 to 70 years. The judge said he would sentence Fiorentino only the most serious of the assault charges he was guilty of, as well as the weapons charges, leaving him with far less time than the prosecution had recommended.

Defense attorney Paul Hetznecker of Philadelphia, representing Fiorentino, urged the judge to reject the prosecution's suggested sentence and argued that Barraza was attempting to "demonize" his client rather than stick to a "rational" sentence. Hetznecker pointed out that his client had a family support system, many of whom had written Carmody asking for leniency.

"This is a serious case, there is no doubt about it," Hetznecker said in his statement. "But put your sentence in a rational framework rather than give in to an emotionally charged plea for a life sentence." A sentence within the state's guidelines would keep Fiorentino in prison effectively until his career as a criminal had ended.

Arden Hunt, Fiorentino's sister, spoke on his behalf after having attended all of the June trial. She said her family had suffered because of his arrest, largely because her mother did not have him to help care for his disabled step-father.

"My brother deserves a chance to reenter society so he can be the kind of person I know he will be," Hunt said.

On his own behalf, Fiorentino said little. "I just ask that you show leniency for me," he told Carmody.

Coatesville Police Chief Jack Laufer, who took over the leadership of the city's then-embattled police department just 11 months before the shooting, told Carmody in brief remarks that Fiorentino's sentence should reflect a recognition that violent behavior would not be tolerated, especially against police.

The city's struggle to emerge from economic depression won't be successful, "if people and their families don't feel safe in their homes," Laufer said.

It is the contact between the community and police, he said, that felons such as Fiorentino — on parole, carrying guns — be punished for being "ready and willing to assault those who are assigned to protect us as we sleep."

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