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The crime that shook a county

Howard County: Judge Leasure's tough sentence for rapist reflected community's outrage.

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YOUNG GIRLS waiting outside a public library never will have to worry about Timothy Bryan Chase again.

Howard Circuit Court Judge Diane O. Leasure handed down an appropriate sentence to the 29-year-old rapist: Life in prison plus 25 years for his conviction in the March 1996 attack on a 15-year-old girl outside the Howard County Library's Central Branch in Columbia.

The crime shook Howard County's sense of security, perhaps more than any since the grisly carjacking murder of Pam Basu in 1992.

If a child is not safe outside the library, people wondered, is any place safe? Chase's heinous act, committed in front of the victim's 7-year-old sister, called for a harsh penalty.

Judge Leasure delivered, articulating the community's condemnation of Chase's actions with a stiff sentence that was at the high end of the state's guidelines. The Columbia man must spend 27 1/2 years in prison before he becomes eligible for parole.

As the judge pointed out, Chase robbed the victim, an honor student, and her sister "of their innocence, of their childhood and of their trust in people."

Chase insisted that he is innocent, but police and prosecutors built a tight case. Investigators found rings stolen from the victim in his pockets. Co-workers at Howard County General Hospital, where he was a janitor, testified that he tried to sell the rings to fellow employees there. DNA evidence also linked him to the crime.

Chase cannot be trusted in society. He has spent almost his entire adult life in prison.

Former critics of Judge Leasure, particularly her opposition in last year's bitter judicial race, tried unsuccessfully to raise the specter that she would be soft on lawbreakers.

While it would be unwise to assess a judge on her actions in one case, Judge Leasure demonstrated clearly in handling this sensitive matter the ability to render a penalty befitting of the crime.

The sentence will not erase the horrible memory that two girls will carry the rest of their lives, nor can it fully restore the sense of security Howard countians felt prior to that crime. But there was justice in the way the judge brought closure to one nightmarish ordeal.

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