

The Sun

**Ex-trooper sentenced to 25 years
He was convicted of second-degree murder in death of stepson**

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April 25, 1998 Page(s): 2B
Edition: FINAL
Section: NEWS
Length: 436 words
Record Number: BSUN04250377

Former Maryland State Police Trooper James M. Harding Jr. was ordered to spend 25 years in prison yesterday for killing his stepson, a sentence that brought cries of joy from his estranged wife and her family.

Harding, 40, sat ramrod straight as Howard Circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure read the sentence. L'Net Harding, and their daughter, Meka, 14, hugged as other family members briefly clapped in the courtroom pews.

The sentence brings to a close an emotional case that pitted family members against each other. L'Net Harding buried her son, Marine Cpl. Andre Boone, 23, in March 1997.

In December, she came to her husband's eight-day murder trial hoping he would be held accountable for her son's death.

"Andre was very special; he was my first-born. I raised him the best I knew how," L'Net Harding said yesterday in court. "Whoever would know that his life would be cut short by the one person who [also] helped raise him, and the one person who has never said 'I'm sorry.' "

Leasure gave Harding a 30-year sentence yesterday but suspended five years. Once released, Harding must serve five years of supervised probation.

In December, Harding was found guilty of second-degree murder in the shooting of Boone March 21, 1997. Harding never denied killing Boone but argued that he acted in self-defense during a fight.

Harding testified in December that when he fired his pistol-grip shotgun he meant only to scare Boone. Boone, he said, was threatening to burn down the house.

Yesterday, Anthony Covington, Harding's attorney, repeated that defense. Covington said Boone came to the family's Columbia house looking for trouble.

"No one can hurt more than James Harding," Covington said. "It's a tragedy to lose a child, someone you have raised since 6 years old."

Before sentencing Harding yesterday, Leasure described the case as "a story of shattered dreams."

She recalled the on-the-job accident that cost Harding his dream job as a state trooper. She recalled the life of Boone, who had recently been appointed a noncommissioned officer as part of the Marine Corps unit that guards the president at the White House.

Then she addressed Harding: "As a trained police officer, Mr. Harding, on that day you made a choice [to fire the gun]. Unfortunately, [the shot] did more than just scare [Boone]; it resulted in his death."

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