



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 14, 2017

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Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission testifies in sentencing hearing for the murders of two homeless Navajo men

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – Representatives from the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission were in attendance Thursday, as Bernalillo County District Court Judge Briana H. Zamora sentenced Gilbert Tafoya to serve the maximum of 20 years in the New Mexico Department of Corrections for the brutal beating deaths of two homeless Navajo men in 2014. Tafoya pled guilty to two counts of second-degree murder in 2015 as part of a plea deal in which he was required to testify against two other defendants in the case.

In July 2014, Tafoya and two other defendants beat Kee Thompson Jr. and Allison Gorman, both members of the Navajo Nation, with cinder blocks, fence poles, and other objects as the two men slept in an empty lot on the west side of the city of Albuquerque. A third victim was able to escape the beating and run from the empty lot.

During Thursday's sentencing hearing, Thompson's sister recalled helping to raise her younger brother as he grew into an adult and said he was like her own child.

"I can't imagine the pain he suffered," said his sister as she asked the court to sentence Tafoya to the maximum term allowed. "No one should have to die in such a cruel manner."

Gorman's siblings and daughter also shared tearful testimonies in which they described him as a loving and caring person who could bring a smile to anyone's face. They also stated that Gorman was the primary caretaker of his elderly parents who worked on their farm and would take them to their hospital appointments and translate for them.

"He did a wonderful job taking care of our parents and they were heartbroken when they heard the news," said Gorman's sister, as she described having to tell her parents of their son's death back in July 2014.

Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission chair Dr. Jennifer Denetdale also testified at the hearing, and asked Judge Zamora to impose the maximum sentence for Tafoya.

"The deaths of our relatives, men who were brothers, sons, uncles, fathers and grandfathers, are felt every single day by family members and within our communities. Their remembrances also

include the horrific way in which their relatives died at the hands of the defendant, Gilbert Tafoya. What the Court is allowed to sentence this man, Gilbert Tafoya, is in no way any measure of what he deserves and any measure of justice that he should face by the state of New Mexico and this nation. The sentence handed down by your honor will never be just or answer for the horror of the crimes against Allison Gorman and Kee Thompson, Jr. and their families,” Dr. Denetdale said.

The Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission has supported the families and provided resources since the deaths occurred, added Dr. Denetdale.

In addition, the commission began working with former Albuquerque Mayor Richard J. Berry, which led to the creation of the Native American Homelessness Task Force. In December 2014, the commission held a public hearing in Albuquerque in which members of the Navajo Nation testified about being victims of assault and mistreatment while living in the city.

According to statistics provided by the city, Native Americans represent approximately six-percent of the population, however, they make up approximately 16-percent of the homeless population.

The Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission said they will seek a meeting with new Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller, to resume the efforts of the Native American Homelessness Task Force in order to continue addressing violence against homeless Navajo people.

“With today’s sentencing, we hope that the families of the victims are afforded some measure of justice although we know that it is not enough,” said Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland). “We will keep the victims and their families in our thoughts and prayers.”

In December 2015, Alex Rios was found guilty on two counts of second-degree murder and later sentenced by Judge Zamora to serve a maximum sentence of 67 years in prison for the murders of Thompson and Gorman. The third defendant, Nathaniel Carrillo, pled no contest to the murders in July 2016 and was sentenced to 26 years in prison.

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