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Murderer cleared in sex assault

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NASHUA – Jurors acquitted a former Hudson man Thursday on charges that he sexually assaulted his daughter in the months before murdering her mother.

John Little, 65, now will become eligible for parole, having served more than 25 years in prison for the March 16, 1981, murder of Deborah Little.

Little stabbed his wife to death in the kitchen of their home at 193 Webster St. in Hudson, after she told him she wanted a divorce. He was convicted and sentenced to 36 years to life in prison before the state's "truth in sentencing" law took effect, so he may be paroled before serving his full minimum term.

Little had faced four aggravated felonious sexual assault charges, alleging that he abused his daughter on various occasions in 1981, when she was 13. One of the charges was dismissed during the trial.

One of the jurors contacted The Telegraph and said she was "nauseated" by the verdict, but the lack of corroborating evidence left the jury no choice.

Little's daughter told police that her father began sexually assaulting her when she was 3 years old, but prosecutors weren't able to file charges for the earlier allegations because of the statute of limitations that applied at the time.

Little's daughter and other family members wept as the jury foreman announced the verdicts, and one woman called out to jurors afterward, "You just freed a pedophile."

Little's daughter and her cousin lamented the verdict in the hallway outside the courtroom. Her husband held Little's daughter as she wept.

"Oh," she moaned. "We're going to have to move away. He's going to get me next."

The trial this week in Hillsborough County Superior Court was Little's second on the sexual assault charges. The first one, in January, ended in a mistrial with jurors "hopelessly deadlocked" after less than one day of deliberation.

Jurors in the second trial deliberated for most of the afternoon Wednesday before announcing a verdict first thing Thursday morning.

The juror who spoke with The Telegraph on the condition of anonymity said about half of the jurors were "relatively convinced" that Little had assaulted his daughter, but felt prosecutors had failed to prove it.

"They did not present a sufficient case. They left room for reasonable doubt because they did not do a good job," she said. "There were too many big holes that a lot of people in the jury room just couldn't get past."

"We felt we had no choice," she said. "I think a lot of us felt pretty nauseated with that fact, myself included. . . . We think the prosecution did a lousy job, not necessarily that we didn't believe that something happened to (Little's daughter)."

Some jurors also were more skeptical of the woman's testimony, the juror acknowledged.

"I think it would be fair to say that not everybody found (her) to be as credible as others found her to be," she said.

Little's lawyer, Jonathan Cohen, could not be reached for comment after the verdict.

Assistant County Attorney Shawn Sweeney said prosecutors would meet with the woman and other family members, and consider what arguments and evidence they can present during Little's parole hearing.

Little had been moved to a halfway house in anticipation of being released on parole when the assault charges were brought. The parole board declined to consider his case while the charges were pending, and he was sent back to prison.

The board will schedule another hearing to consider whether Little should be paroled. If released, Little will remain under parole supervision for the rest of his life.

As is common in sexual assault cases, the evidence against Little consisted mainly of the alleged victim's testimony. Little offered no evidence at all, but Cohen argued Little's daughter made up the alleged abuse as a ploy to keep her father in prison.

"The complainant has a motive to lie. She has a motive to fabricate," Cohen told jurors during his closing argument Wednesday. "He killed her mother. That is a horrible thing."

"She admitted to you . . . she hates him," Cohen said, adding later, "She doesn't believe he's been punished enough. She wants to use you to punish him more."

The woman told her husband of the alleged abuse around 1994, and first disclosed the alleged abuse to authorities during a court hearing in 1996, when her father argued for his sentence to be reduced. Police didn't begin to investigate until 2004, however, after the woman again testified about the alleged abuse during a parole hearing.

Cohen questioned why Little's daughter told police in 1981, after the murder, that she had a good relationship with her father.

"Timing matters. Motive matters," Cohen told jurors.

Prosecutors argued that Little's daughter was silenced by shame, humiliation and fear of her father.

"He told her, 'This is what daddies do to their little girls,' and he was right, as far as she could tell," Sweeney told jurors Wednesday. "He told her that if she told her mom, her mom would be gone forever."

"He threatened to take her mother away, and then he followed through," Sweeney said. "That was enough to keep (her) silent for years."

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