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Kansas couple sentenced for abusing group-home residents

By Robert Rhodes
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WICHITA, Kan. — A Newton Mennonite couple were sentenced to jail Jan. 23 for enslaving and sexually exploiting the mentally ill residents of two unlicensed group homes they operated for more than 20 years.

Arlan Kaufman received a 30-year sentence, and Linda Kaufman received a seven-year term as his accomplice in years of abuse, involuntary servitude and Medicare fraud. They were sentenced by U.S. District Judge Monti Belot, who oversaw their five-week trial in 2005.

Arlan Kaufman, 69, a former licensed clinical social worker, was found guilty of all 31 conspiracy, involuntary servitude and fraud charges the couple faced. Linda Kaufman, 62, a former registered nurse, was found guilty of all but one. They were convicted of crimes dating back to 1984.

The Kaufmans operated the Kaufman House Residential Treatment Center in Newton, incorporated in 1980 after Arlan Kaufman left the Bethel College faculty in 1978. He founded Bethel's social work program in 1971.

The couple were accused of forcing their clients to live and work in the nude and perform sexually-explicit acts at the group homes in Newton and on a farm near Potwin in Butler County. Some of the nude activities were captured on dozens of videotapes made by Arlan Kaufman.

Before sentencing began, Belot ruled that Arlan Kaufman had committed perjury during the trial when he denied using a stun-gun on a group home resident, making Kaufman eligible for a longer prison term.

During the sentencing hearing, three former Kaufman House residents described for Belot the impact of their years under the Kaufmans' supervision.

One of the former residents, a male, said he forgave the Kaufmans for abusing him.

"A new life is opening up for me now, and I embrace it with great joy," the man said. "I forgive them."

Another former resident, a woman, said she felt validated by the guilty verdicts returned against the couple, after years of being doubted by authorities.

"This should be a wakeup call to the state of Kansas," she said. "Most of us have not had that validation for a long time."

Also at the hearing, Belot described the contents of "several dozen" letters he had received seeking leniency for the Kaufmans. Belot also said he was confident the Kaufmans' three adult children had no knowledge of the crimes committed by their parents.

Petitions circulated in several Mennonite churches, he said, were not considered in his sentencing deliberations because they showed an insufficient grasp of the case and blamed the media for damaging Arlan Kaufman's reputation.

The Kaufmans are members of Faith Mennonite Church in Newton.

Before he was sentenced, Arlan Kaufman read a nearly three-hour statement that summarized his professional career, maintained his innocence and sharply criticized the group home residents whose testimony had led to his conviction.

Before her sentencing, a psychologist testified that Linda Kaufman was a victim of her husband's overbearing personality. After her release from prison, she will serve three years on probation.

Belot scheduled a hearing for Feb. 7 to determine whether the victims will receive restitution from the sale of real estate forfeited by the Kaufmans, including the two group homes and the Potwin farm.

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