

Los Angeles; Sleepwalking Defense in Killing Doesn't Sway Jury; Panel convicts man who said he thought he was acting out a dream when he beat and stabbed his girlfriend at a Santa Catalina hotel.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Prosecutor Ken Lamb said that [Stephen Reitz] threw a flower pot at [Eva Marie Weinfurtnr]'s head, cracking her skull, and beat her repeatedly. He then stabbed her in the neck.

In the months before the attack, Weinfurtnr's relatives noticed bruises on her body and warned her that she should stop seeing Reitz because he was dangerous, said her sister, Joyce Dean.

GUILTY: Stephen Reitz, 28, of Coronado is handcuffed after a jury in Long Beach convicted him of first-degree murder in the October 2001 death of Eva Marie Weinfurtnr. He will be sentenced July 28.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Brittany Murray Long Beach Press- Telegram

FULL TEXT

A Coronado man who said he was sleepwalking when he killed his married girlfriend in a Santa Catalina hotel was convicted Thursday of first-degree murder.

The Long Beach Superior Court jury deliberated about 15 hours before finding Stephen Reitz, 28, guilty. He will be sentenced July 28.

Reitz, a commercial fisherman, told authorities that he was unconscious and acting out a dream when he killed Eva Marie Weinfurtnr, 42, during a weekend getaway in October 2001.

Prosecutor Ken Lamb said that Reitz threw a flower pot at Weinfurtnr's head, cracking her skull, and beat her repeatedly. He then stabbed her in the neck.

Reitz told police that he found Weinfurtnr's body at the foot of the bed after dreaming that he was fighting off an intruder. He also told police the pair had been drinking and using cocaine.

Weinfurtnr, a jewelry artist also from Coronado, had been seeing Reitz for about 10 months.

The defense had emphasized Reitz's history of mental problems and the medical possibility that someone could be capable of committing a violent crime while sleeping.

"It was the only defense we had, because my client said he was unconscious. There was no other defense we could use because this is what really happened," attorney Theodore P. Veganer said. "We had the best doctors in the nation say that this could happen."

Veganer said Reitz expected the guilty verdict because he knew jurors might find the explanation suspect.

Veganer, who said he will ask for a new trial, called this jury "too afraid" to acquit his client. "They were scared to let him go free because of what the public would say."

Several jurors said the panel might have been convinced by a sleepwalking defense if Reitz had just thrown the flower pot. But the attack that followed convinced them that his defense was implausible.

"He was a fisherman, he knew what he was doing with the knife," said Tom Mahoney, 38, a juror from Long Beach. Mahoney said he also was convinced by testimony that Reitz had a history of violence.

In the months before the attack, Weinfurter's relatives noticed bruises on her body and warned her that she should stop seeing Reitz because he was dangerous, said her sister, Joyce Dean.

Juror Roel Salvador, 26, of Long Beach said the graphic photographs of Weinfurter's body influenced the panel.

"You could do a few things sleepwalking, like the doctors said, but not all that," he said.

Lamb, a deputy district attorney for the county, said after the verdict, "It was a brutal, brutal murder, and he was held accountable."

Weinfurter's cocaine use and her troubled marriage had concerned her large family – she was the eighth of nine children – relatives said.

"We knew something like this could happen," Dean said. The verdict "won't bring her back, but this is justice at least."

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: GUILTY: Stephen Reitz, 28, of Coronado is handcuffed after a jury in Long Beach convicted him of first-degree murder in the October 2001 death of Eva Marie Weinfurter. He will be sentenced July 28.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Brittany Murray Long Beach Press- Telegram

Credit: Times Staff writer

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