

The Salem News

Online Edition

Wednesday, March

24, 2004

Man gets 8-10 years in meat cleaver assault

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SALEM -- Saying he had to protect the public, a Salem Superior Court judge yesterday sentenced a man he called "a time bomb" to eight to 10 years in state prison for attacking a man with a meat cleaver in a Beverly barroom.

Wayne Launsby, "at the moment, is a time bomb, a very dangerous time bomb, one of the few people I've seen over the years that I believe actually has the potential to kill someone," Judge Howard Whitehead said in sentencing Launsby for the Oct. 25, 2002, assault on an Amesbury man inside the Lighthouse Lounge.

Launsby, 41, of Rowley, had been

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thrown out of the bar for being drunk and disruptive. So he went into a nearby Chinese restaurant, grabbed a meat cleaver and walked back into the bar, approaching the man who had ejected him, Mark Cushman, 38, of Amesbury.

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As the victim raised his hand to protect his face, the cleaver landed, nearly severing the hand.

Three weeks ago, a Salem Superior Court jury convicted Launsby of assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, but cleared him of the more serious charge of armed assault with intent to murder - apparently believing his argument that he was acting in self-defense.

Launsby, who had taken the stand in his own defense, said he'd shown up at the bar with the meat cleaver to ask someone to call him a cab, and simply wanted the weapon in case there was trouble from Cushman, who he claimed had threatened him.

What jurors did not know at the time was that just months before the attack, Launsby had violently attacked and beaten a longtime girlfriend in Everett, for which he had served 90 days in jail.

And in 1998, he was accused of trying to convince another former girlfriend to kill his ex-wife, though the charge was later dropped and Launsby's lawyer, Joseph Edwards, called the allegations "an event that happened in never-never land."

Asks for forgiveness

The judge was unswayed by Launsby's own plea for forgiveness.

"It's very unfortunate what happened between me and Mr. Cushman," Launsby told the judge yesterday. "I take away no fault on my part for that. I never set out to hurt anyone. I would hope one day they would find it in their hearts to forgive me for the pain and harm I've caused."

Whitehead could have sentenced Launsby to a term in the county house of correction and mandatory alcohol treatment. But he opted for state prison -- convinced that Launsby has not yet acknowledged that he has a drinking problem that triggers violent outbursts.

"As I see it, Mr. Launsby doesn't have that recognition yet," said Whitehead, despite Launsby's protests to the contrary. Nor, said

the judge, does Launsby acknowledge his anger. Without that acknowledgement, the judge said, Launsby is unlikely to deal with those problems effectively.

"The only remedy is to contain the time bomb," the judge said.

Whitehead's decision came after a sentencing investigation and hearing he had ordered after the jury's verdict.

That investigation revealed a troubled past, and, over the past decade, repeated issues with alcohol and violence.

Launsby, who spent more than 15 years in the Army, was discharged after two incidents, one a drunken-driving arrest and the other, leaving the scene of a crash, in Georgia. A probation officer who interviewed Launsby's mother and sister said they regret helping him win a discharge, because he lost the structure of the Army and began a downward spiral.

A former girlfriend from Everett appeared to testify that during her 3 1/2 year relationship with Launsby, he drank daily and was often possessive and aggressive when other men were around.

In April 2002, Launsby attacked her, she said, grabbing her by the arms and throwing her onto a table, then banging her head off the floor, she told the judge. When she went to call police, he came after her and choked her with his arm.

When she tried to use a tea kettle to fend him off, he grabbed her, slammed her into a wall and a drainpipe, then beat her in the head with the kettle, splitting her head and leaving a scar on her cheek. He then got a beer and began watching television as she crawled away for help.

Launsby got a 90-day jail sentence for that incident. "I thought that I was worth more than that," his victim told the judge.

She is one of two former girlfriends, as well as Launsby's ex-wife, who have restraining orders against him.

Edwards, the defense lawyer, who had objected to the woman's testimony, argued that she had "embellished" the account since the incident.

'Scared of this man'

Cushman, the victim in the meat-

cleaver attack, also urged the judge to lock up Launsby. "I'm a man, not a small man, and I'm scared of this man myself," he told the judge. "I don't like being involved in sending a man to jail, but then again, I don't like the idea of imagining my mother going to a funeral."

While Edwards urged a short, county jail term of 18 months, coupled with treatment, prosecutor Murat Erkan was seeking nearly the maximum -- nine to 10 years.

"This defendant has had this problem for such a long time, it's become a component of who he is," said the prosecutor. "This defendant becomes violent when he drinks.

"He needs to be punished," Erkan said. "But more importantly, society needs to be protected from Mr. Launsby."

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