Crime & Courts

Anchorage 'serial rapist' sentenced to 70 years in prison

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Clifford Lee looks at judge Paul Olson during sentencing proceedings Friday, Jan. 6, 2017, at the Nesbett Courthouse in Anchorage. As part of a plea agreement, Lee pleaded guilty to two counts of sexual assault, although he admitted to six other sexual assaults.

A man Anchorage police called a "serial rapist" after his arrest in a five-week string of 2014 attacks was ordered to serve 70 years in prison Monday under a plea agreement in which he admitted raping eight women dating back to 2001.

Prosecutors said Clifford K.I. Lee, 37, was sentenced to a total of 90 years with 20 suspended by Anchorage Superior Court Judge Paul Olson, on two counts of first-degree sexual assault. Lee originally was charged with nine sexual-assault counts, but prosecutors dismissed seven in an August deal they said ensured that victims "do not have to relive the trauma Lee inflicted on them" at trial.

As the two-day hearing began Friday, Lee sat with public defender Evan Chyun, remaining silent with his eyes downcast. After Olson heard recorded statements from victims and sentencing concerns from both sides Friday, the hearing concluded Monday with Olson handing down his sentence.

The first of four rapes and one attempted rape that led to Lee's 2014 arrest occurred in late June of that year, according to police. Investigators later said Lee targeted intoxicated women walking alone in downtown and Midtown Anchorage.

After picking up women in his black 2001 Chevrolet Tahoe and driving to South Anchorage, police said, Lee used death threats and a stun gun to coerce them into compliance — although one woman escaped him.

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Lee was pulled over and arrested in Spenard on July 31, 2014, hours after he was identified in a photo lineup by the last of the four rape victims. Police subsequently called for any other women victimized by Lee to come forward, and DNA testing at the Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory in Anchorage linked Lee to unsolved rapes in 2001 and 2005 involving the same methods as the 2014 cases.

Assistant district attorney Jenna Gruenstein sought a total sentence of 99 years for Lee, arguing Friday that he systematically raped disadvantaged women.

Anchorage police Detective Mikell Von Dolteren, an investigator on the case, testified for the prosecution that Lee was intelligent and charismatic in interviews. Getting him to confirm specific details of the rapes was like "pulling teeth," however, until he was directly confronted with physical evidence.

"It became fairly obvious, you know, that he was targeting women that were more vulnerable," Von Dolteren said. "They had a smaller stature, were older, had a problem with alcohol or drugs or both — some kind of diminished capacity that would make them more pliant or more controllable."

Chyun sought a 47-year sentence on the two counts with some time to be served concurrently, saying Lee still wouldn't be released until 2049 at the age of 70. He also pointed out that Lee voluntarily offered in the agreement to accept greater monitoring of his activities after his release.

"The state's proposal, which is basically to keep Mr. Lee in jail for the rest of his life, completely ignores rehabilitation," Chyun said. "Mr. Lee has made a series of mistakes — he's trying to atone for them, he's made them over the course of 35 years."

Olson's sentence calls for Lee to consecutively serve 50-year and 40-year terms, with 10 years of each term suspended. Lee had faced a maximum sentence of 188 years in the case.

Loren Holmes contributed information to this story.

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Chris Klint, a lifelong Alaskan and UAA graduate, covers breaking news in the mornings. He spent more than five years at Anchorage TV station KTUU before joining Alaska Dispatch News.

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