

The Philadelphia Inquirer philly.com

Monday, October 5, 2015 Philadelphia Media Network

Christina Regusters gets 40 years' prison in 'horror show'

Matt Gelb, Inquirer
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Inside Courtroom 1101, the girl followed her mother to the edge of the jury box Monday. They sat, raised their right hands, and peered at the West Philadelphia woman convicted of kidnapping and sexually assaulting the 8-year-old girl.

The girl fidgeted with her pink Hello Kitty bag. She wore a glittered black T-shirt. She listened as lawyers chronicled the horrible things Christina Regusters had done to her.

Then, the girl leaned into a microphone, and she was resolute.

"What she did to me was wrong," the girl said, "and I think she shouldn't do it to anyone else."

Many in the packed room began to cry.

Common Pleas Court Judge Jeffrey P. Minehart, who likened Regusters' crimes to "a horror show," sentenced her to 40 years to life in prison for the 2013 attack that sparked a citywide search for the missing girl, then 5.

"This," Minehart said, "is a terrible case."

At her chance to speak, Regusters, 22, said she was ashamed and asked the judge for forgiveness. She said she was not a monster. Then, she turned and scanned the courtroom,

searching for the girl whom she stands convicted of blindfolding, stuffing in a laundry bag, and sexually abusing with a sharp object.

"I'm asking for your forgiveness," Regusters said. "I am sorry. Although you may not take it, I apologize."

The girl's mother said she could not accept the apology. Her daughter, she said, harbors awful memories.

"She's always going to have that space where there is a gray area that no one can shine a light on," the mother said in court. "No one can explain why anyone would do that to a small child."

Regusters, dressed in a burgundy hooded sweatshirt, lowered her head into her folded arms.

A jury, after 12 days' testimony last September, found Regusters guilty of kidnapping the girl from Bryant School in West Philadelphia after disguising herself in Muslim garb. Prosecutors said the girl was held captive for 19 hours.

Regusters, a former worker at the day-care center the girl attended, maintained her innocence during the trial. Her lawyer, W. Fred Harrison Jr., said others were involved in the crime.

But the prosecutor, Erin O'Brien, said after the sentencing that "the

evidence pointed to her and her alone."

Regusters' DNA was found on a shirt the girl had worn. An FBI expert had testified that Regusters' computer showed Internet searches for Muslim clothing, as well as for covering up DNA from sexual assaults.

"The Christina I know, she is loving and she is kind," her mother, Dorothy Regusters, told the judge. "The Christina described in this courtroom, I don't know that Christina."

A court-ordered evaluation found Regusters - who had her own history of being abused in childhood - had no mental-health ailments. If she is ever released, she faces up to 20 years' probation as a registered sex offender.

The girl, who testified during the three-week trial, was credited with breaking the case; she led detectives to a "talking bird" she remembered from her ordeal.

The bird was a macaw parrot, a pet in the house where she was assaulted.

"It could never be overstated how helpful she was," O'Brien said. "She is admirable."

Thomas Kline, a lawyer representing the family, said family members were "gratified" by the sentencing.

The girl was so badly injured, prosecutors said, that she had to wear a colostomy bag for six months.

"She testified with grace and poise," Kline said. "She is a remarkable child."

The family is suing the Philadelphia School District, alleging that it put the girl at risk.

Following the sentencing, the girl lingered in the courtroom. She fiddled with a relative's Apple Watch. Another family member hugged her.

"You did a good job," a woman told the girl.

Her mother patted her on her head.