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## The Valley

# Winnetka Man Gets Life for Killing His Son, 4, in Fire

**At an emotional hearing, he is also ordered to serve a consecutive term for the attempted murder of the boy's mother.**

[January 25, 2003](#) | Kristina Sauerwein | Times Staff Writer

To a background of gut-wrenching, hair-curling sobs, a Los Angeles County judge Friday sentenced the son of a Baptist minister to life in prison without parole for murdering his 4-year-old son in a fire at the Granada Hills townhouse where the boy lived with his mother.

Superior Court Judge Lance Ito also ordered Duane West, 31, of Winnetka to serve a consecutive life prison term with the possibility of parole for trying to kill the boy's mother, Jaquetta "Nicole" Taylor. Months before the crime on July 9, 2001, Taylor informed West that he was the boy's father and asked him for \$150 a month in child support.

Before the sentencing in a downtown Los Angeles courtroom, West, a married man with two daughters, cried as he asked his relatives and friends -- as well as the victim's family -- to forgive him for the death of Marquise Diantae McDonald, a boy who dreamed of becoming a firefighter.

"I never went over [to the townhouse] to hurt Marquise," he said in choked-up, choppy sentences. " ... My problem was with Nicole ... I never wanted to hurt you, Marquise. ... If I could give my life for Marquise, I would.

"All I ask you guys today is to forgive me," said West, dressed in orange prison garb with a shaved head. "Nicole, please forgive me. I forgive you."

Prosecutors contended that West planned the attack in which he beat Taylor and set her hair on fire with nail polish remover and a match. According to testimony, the fire spread to the bed where Marquis was sleeping. Instead of helping the boy escape, West threw his son into a closet door mirror with a shattering force and prevented the 4-year-old from escaping.

Marquise suffered third-degree burns to 73% of his body and died the next day.

A jury last month convicted West -- who had no prior criminal record, a factor in saving him from the death penalty -- of first-degree murder, attempted murder, child abuse, arson causing bodily injury, first-degree burglary and torture.

During the hearing, families on both sides broke down in shrieks and sobs.

Several people left the courtroom wailing when West's supporters, including Taylor's brother, recalled him as a compassionate man who mentored children through sports. Others hung their heads low, tears dripping from their faces.

The families also offered each other condolences, acknowledging that they were all victims. But what they respectfully disagreed on was West's punishment.

The Rev. Samuel West Jr. urged the judge to be lenient on his son. "I cannot believe in my heart he did this," the father said.

Taylor had testified that she originally thought Marquise was the son of another man, which is why she gave Marquise the last name McDonald. But as Marquise began growing, she noticed physical resemblances to West, with whom she had had a one-night stand.

Keith Jamerson, Taylor's brother, asked the judge to be "merciful" toward West. Rocking back and forth as he spoke, Jamerson said he believed West lacked emotional coping skills and did not mean to harm Marquise.

"I forgive you," Jamerson said to West, who nodded his head and wiped his eyes.

Marquise's aunt, Rosalind Michelle Jamerson, acknowledged that West was once a nice person. "Everyone in this court on both sides is hurting," she said, shaking and sobbing. "[West] was a good person, but my nephew was an innocent 4-year-old boy -- and I cannot forgive."

Defense attorney Ilona Peltyn has argued that West suffered an emotional meltdown and perceived Taylor's requests for child support as a threat.

"This is a man who up until this incident lived a very normal and productive life," Peltyn said Friday, her eyes tearing up. "[In prison], he's going to have to learn how to survive in a very violent atmosphere."

Peltyn requested a new trial and asked the judge to strike the special circumstance allegation of arson, which carries a mandatory life prison term without parole.

Judge Ito denied the motions.

"This is probably one of the most unusual cases in my many years in the criminal justice system," said Ito, who was the judge during the O.J. Simpson murder case nearly a decade ago.

Ito characterized West as a man who had "a decent and substantial upbringing" and whose "aberrational conduct" hurt "two good families."

But Ito said he had to consider all factors. "What was so painful to hear was the testimony" from Taylor, he said, emphasizing that the hurt Marquise suffered was "beyond excruciating."

"It is just unspeakable," Ito said, as he issued the sentencing. The defense attorney said she would appeal.