

CRIME & COURTS

'I had to find out the hard way that evil does exist': Marlin Thomas sentenced to life for multiple sex trafficking charges

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They were physically and verbally abused, forced to have sex with strangers and strung out with drugs or threats to their families. Three have since died.

For more than a dozen women, meeting Marlin Thomas was the beginning of a hellish ordeal. At his sentencing hearing Monday in federal court in Des Moines, Judge John Jarvey heard from several of the women and their family members about the abuse he put them through and how it affected their lives.

"You intentionally groomed and took the innocence of so many," one woman, identified in court as B.T., wrote in a statement read by an investigator. "We will never get that back."

Thomas, 46, of Des Moines was sentenced Monday to life in prison after admitting to trafficking and drug charges involving six women and a 14-year-old girl. Des Moines Police Sgt. Brady Carney, the lead investigator in the case, testified he had identified at least 10 more women who had declined to take part in the investigation, which covered nearly a decade of criminal activity from 2009 to 2018. The true number, Carney said, could be even higher.

From May: Des Moines man admits to trafficking 14-year-old runaway in guilty plea to other federal sex trafficking charges

Prosecutors painted a grim portrait of a charismatic manipulator who sought out and preyed on women with substance abuse problems. Several women told investigators they first met Thomas when he approached them at gas stations or other businesses next to halfway houses and other addiction recovery centers.

"This is not a one-time thing," prosecutor Amy Jennings said. "He has a plan, and he has done that over and over to vulnerable women."

At first, the women described Thomas as good-looking and charming, and several believed themselves to be in relationships with him. Then the same pattern would unfold: He would push them first to have sex with him and another man together, then he would begin posting ads online for men to have sex

with them, demanding they bring in a take of \$1,000 or \$1,200 a day. When they didn't, he would beat them or withhold drugs or food, Carney said.

Even after the women were no longer being trafficked by Thomas, his impact on their lives lingered. In April 2020, Carney reached out to one woman who since getting away had gone to rehab, who he said was very emotional when asked about Thomas.

"She wanted to take the night to gather herself and then said she'd talk to me in the morning," Carney testified.

The next day, he learned from other officers that the woman had died in the night from a heroin overdose, leaving behind a 5-month-old daughter.

More: Council Bluffs man, a foreign exchange student program coordinator, sentenced to decades in prison

'Unspeakable depravity went into this'

Thomas was indicted in July 2020 on what grew to 17 sex trafficking and drug charges, and pleaded guilty in May to six counts of sex trafficking by force, fraud and coercion.

Although he admitted guilt on those charges, Thomas filed 100 objections to various statements in his presentence investigation, many of which prosecutors characterized as "frivolous." To address those issues, the court heard nearly four hours of testimony Friday from Carney, who described in detail each woman's allegations, and how police had corroborated those claims in interviews with other women and from phone, hotel and vehicle records.

The testimony depicted a lifestyle in which women were treated as currency. One woman told police that Thomas took her to a professional photographer to take photos for her online ads, then made her have sex with the photographer as payment. On another occasion, Thomas' car broke down. He made the girl he was with, a 14-year-old who'd run away from home, have sex with the mechanic to pay for the repairs.

Previously: Des Moines man indicted on federal sex trafficking charges spanning nearly a decade

To force the women to comply, he used carrots and sticks, offering drugs and other rewards backed with the threat of violence. One woman, to whom he was said to be particularly violent, travelled with him to Chicago to be trafficked after he took away her infant child and told her she could see the baby again if she went with him.

Federal sentencing guidelines suggested a range of between 360 months to life in prison. Thomas' attorney, Andrew Graeve, argued a life sentence is "simply too much" and asked Jarvey for a sentence below the minimum recommendation.

Thomas, who tried unsuccessfully to withdraw his guilty plea, spoke only to voice his belief that prosecutors had withheld evidence favorable to his case. Court records show Thomas recently filed a lawsuit, which was promptly dismissed, against his attorney, prosecutors, and the magistrate judge who handled his initial appearances.

Jennings asked for a life sentence.

"The shame that continues to last with these women ruins the rest of their lives, and that is why he needs to be locked up the rest of his life," she said.

More: Council Bluffs restaurant owner found guilty of sex trafficking minors, adults

Jarvey said he would have sentenced Thomas to life even if it had exceeded the guideline recommendation.

"Unspeakable depravity went into this," he said, calling Thomas a "master manipulator."

Before the sentencing, a number of victim impact statements were read to the court. The mother of the woman who died in April 2020 wrote that she believes Thomas' abuse led directly to her daughter's death.

"I know you didn't sell the heroin or shoot it up in her arm, but you were a vital part of the equation," she wrote. "... I believe she's in heaven where she finally has peace. Marlin, I don't have peace."

One woman, identified as E.J., spoke in person. From the stand, she described being beaten and raped by Thomas, and seeing him beat and rape other women. She spoke about fearing she was about to die, and how even after she got away, Thomas would continue find her new phone numbers and send torrents of abuse over text message, even once staking out her new apartment in a city seven hours away.

Years later, E.J. said, she still keeps weapons concealed in her vehicle and house to protect herself and has struggled to find trust in romantic relationships.

"I had to find out the hard way that evil does exist," she said.

A second woman had also intended to speak at Monday's hearing, and discussed her statement with Carney as recently as Nov. 10. On Nov. 11, he said, he learned that she too had fatally overdosed overnight.

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