

Man who kidnapped 2-year-old during police standoff learns prison sentence

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A Harrisburg woman found it within herself to forgive a random stranger who stormed her Hall Manor apartment, stole her sleeping 2-year-old, and held the girl hostage for five hours.

“Do you trust in God?” Antonio Hammond raved at Michele Peters as he forced her to record the incident on a phone, claiming with certainty police couldn’t kill him on camera.

But against courtroom norms, Peters told a Dauphin County judge she forgave Antonio Hammond as he stood before the court awaiting his sentence — so much that she called him in jail after his trial and she and her now 5-year-old daughter regularly speak to Hammond behind bars.

It’s cost them around \$400 in phone calls, she said, but the conversations have been healing for both her and her daughter.

Despite Peters’ faith in the 31-year-old, Hammond was looking at two 10-year mandatory sentences for kidnapping and burglary, and Dauphin County Judge Deborah Curcillo ran them back-to-back.

That means Hammond will spend 27.5 to 55 years in state prison for the kidnapping incident May 30, 2023. His attorney had asked for the sentences to be run concurrently, or at the same time, to shorten his incarceration time.

In June, a Dauphin County convicted Hammond of felony kidnapping and burglary, receiving stolen property, flight to avoid apprehension and three firearms offenses following a two-day trial in June.

The jury found him not guilty of aggravated assault on an officer.

Tactical officers ended the hostage situation by entering the home through Peters’ back door and shooting Hammond in the neck, on the left side of his face. He survived his injuries to contest the allegations in court in June.

Hammond’s attorney Michael Palermo argued at trial Hammond didn’t realize the two officers chasing him through Hall Manor were police, and just thought they were armed strangers pursuing him. Palermo also argued the kidnapping charge shouldn’t apply because state law requires there to be proof the defendant used the child as a hostage or shield.

During the incident, Hammond gave the child a bottle, changed her diaper and took a nap with her, Palermo said. Prosecutors put forward witnesses claiming Hammond used her as a human shield, and at one point put a gun to the girl's head — but Palermo denied Hammond had done so.

“He’s not getting father of the year or a trophy, but he doesn’t hold her up to block a gunshot,” Palermo said.

Hammond’s cell phone video recording was the only piece of video evidence presented at trial.

None of the police or drone interactions were recorded and saved as evidence, Palermo pointed out, because none of the officers — including the tactical team that shot Hammond — wore body cameras.

“The great equalizer is body cameras,” Palermo said. “It’s 2023, this technology is available, but the only (person) who provided any video evidence was my client.”

Early into the police standoff, Peters fled the home with one of her three children — the other was outside already — and police refused to allow her to go back in to retrieve the last one, which Hammond held captive.

Keiana Mitchel, Hammond’s sister, told Curcillo that Hammond was not a trouble kid. She said Hammond was living at a halfway house on Cameron Street where he was being beaten. It’s unclear by whom, but that’s why he left, she said.

Dauphin County District Attorney Fran Chardo, who prosecuted the case, pointed out at Wednesday’s sentencing hearing Hammond had previously been convicted of aggravated assault for seriously injuring another person in an unrelated incident. He absconded both probation and parole at the time of the standoff when he walked off the halfway house.

“These are all considerations about the danger of him reoffending,” Chardo said.

Palermo explained while Hammond is on a medication regimen that works for him now, on the day of the incident, his medication was “not right.” he explained Hammond’s mother fatally overdosed in front of him when he was 6 years old, requiring him to seek help for her.

The incident caused long-lasting trauma for him. He suffers from bipolar depression and, following injuries suffered during the incident, cannot hear out his left ear.

“I don’t want to see him warehoused for decades,” Palermo said prior to sentencing. Peters agreed.

Peters understood Hammond could be looking at significant time behind bars, but was hopeful Curcillo would run the separate sentences for each charge concurrently, she told PennLive.

“He has trauma, but he’s also ready to come back from this,” Peters said in court.

Right after jurors found Hammond guilty in June, Peters and Hammond briefly shared an exchange in Curcillo’s courtroom in June, right after jurors read their verdict and departed.

“I apologize,” Hammond told Peters.

“I accept your apology,” Peters replied. “I believe in God and everything happens for a reason.”

After that, Peters learned Hammond wanted to speak to her but was unable to reach her because she was a victim in the case. So one day after trial, she made the call.

The continued calls have helped her daughter, she said.

“I appreciate that,” Peters said in court. “She can live a bit better now.”

“He’s a (expletive), but I have faith in him,” Peters continued, now turning on Hammond: “You got a chance. Stop running from the law.”

Hammond, in a statement difficult to hear from the courtroom gallery, spoke to Curcillo about “life”. He said he made a poor decision he hates, and will be apologizing for his actions for forever.

“It’s not usual she would come in here and forgive you,” Curcillo replied, to no objection from Hammond.

“I believe in prayer,” Hammond said. “Peace and love to you all.”

Hammond shaped his hands into a heart in the direction of his family as he departed the courtroom.