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News from the Office of District Attorney Tori Verber Salazar

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WOMAN PLEADS GUILTY TO MURDER OF FOUR YEAR OLD STEP-DAUGHTER

Stockton – Today, District Attorney Tori Verber Salazar announced that Zulma Chavez, age 22, pleaded guilty on Tuesday January 14, 2020, to one count of second degree murder (Penal code §187(a)), and two counts of felony child abuse/endangerment (Penal Code §273(a)(a)) for the November killing of her four year old step-daughter. The Honorable John Soldati of the San Joaquin County Superior Court will sentence her on March 2, 2020. She will be sentenced to 15 years to life in state prison.

Ms. Chavez opted to plead guilty rather than going to trial in which she would have faced up to 25 years to life in state prison if convicted of first degree murder. If she were convicted of anything less, she would be eligible for a parole hearing after serving 15 years because of the ‘youthful offender’ law codified in Penal Code §3051.

“This is a horrific, heartbreaking case of abuse and murder of an innocent, defenseless child,” said District Attorney Verber Salazar. “However, in a case of this nature where two young boys, who were home at the time of the offense, could have been called to testify before a jury, a judgment call was made to avoid that likelihood. These young boys need to move forward and try to enjoy what is left of their childhood and not face the terrifying prospect of testifying in court.”

According to court records, On November 25, 2018, at approximately 1:30 p.m., Stockton police officers responded to the San Joaquin County General Hospital on a report of child abuse. Dispatch advised that the victim was transported by ambulance with a severe head injury that was possibly life threatening. The victim’s father, Kevin Carames, age 40, reported that her head injury was from running into a bed at their home located in the city of Stockton.

San Joaquin County General Hospital staff advised that a CT scan of the victim's head revealed a brain bleed and she was put on a Medi-Flight helicopter to U.C. Davis Medical Center. Hospital personnel noted other healing injuries on the victim's face and body consistent with child abuse. Later that same day, the victim succumbed to her head injuries.

During the investigation, law enforcement discovered home surveillance video capturing the interaction between Ms. Chavez and the little girl from earlier in the day, prior to sustaining her injuries. Ms. Chavez is observed sitting on the couch. She yells expletives at the victim and two other children in her care. The children get up quickly and walk away from the couch. The victim returns to the couch and Ms. Chavez is seen grabbing the victim by the hand and taking her to a bedroom out of the sight of the camera.

What transpires next is not visible on the camera but can be heard. Ms. Chavez tells the victim, "You're gonna cry, you're gonna cry." The victim's last words were: "I'm not gonna cry, I'm not." The little girl is then heard screaming, there is a horrific thud and shortly thereafter the crying stops. Ms. Chavez then calls the father, who was out of the house, to tell him the victim was unconscious.

When questioned by police, Ms. Chavez changed her story several times. She eventually admitted to causing the injury, but claimed it was an accident.

District Attorney Verber Salazar would like to give special thanks to Detective Pillar Battaglini with the Stockton Police Child Abuse/Sexual Assault Unit and Deputy District Attorney Elton Grau who brought this case to a successful resolution. "It takes a special kind of person to prosecute those who prey on our children. Mr. Grau has devoted the majority of his career to protecting these most innocent of victims."

