

'No way' girl fell, prosecutor says

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Cameron John Brown, right, listens to his co-counsel attorney Lara Yeretsian during closing arguments in a murder case on Tuesday, September 15 in Los Angeles Superior Court. Brown is on trial for murder in connection with the death of his 4-year-old daughter, Lauren Sarene Key, who plunged off a 120-foot cliff in Rancho Palos Verdes in 2000. (Al Seib/Los Angeles Times)

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Jurors who must decide if Cameron Brown is a liar and a killer need not look much further for clues than the Rancho Palos Verdes cliff where his 4-year-old daughter plunged to her death, a prosecutor said in closing arguments Tuesday.

The Los Angeles Superior Court jury of 10 men and two women visited Inspiration Point the previous day, and Deputy District Attorney Craig Hum said its steep drops, rugged terrain and narrow paths prove Brown, 47, lied about how Lauren Sarene Key died nine years ago.

"Ladies and gentleman, we know in our hearts, every single one of us knows, that there is absolutely no way that things would have happened the way the defendant claims," Hum argued.

"There is no way that Lauren would have led the defendant out there, and that's his story," Hum said. "No way."

During nearly seven weeks of testimony in Brown's murder trial, Lauren's mother, Sarah Key-Marer, as well as friends and teachers described Lauren as happy, cheerful and affectionate, but cautious and careful.

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While Brown gave at least three versions of how Lauren went over the 120-foot cliff on Nov. 8, 2000, he consistently said the sandy-blond-haired girl led him on the 1<MD+,%30,%55,%70>1/<MD-,%0,%55,%70>2-mile trek from the playground at Abalone Cove to Inspiration Point, Hum said.

Noting that Lauren was said to be scared of a worm and the edge of the Huntington Beach Pier, the prosecutor asked if it was reasonable to believe that Brown, an avid outdoorsman, would have had trouble keeping up with the girl - as he claimed.

A family photo of Cameron Brown and his daughter Lauren was shown in opening statements Thursday at the Torrance courthouse.

In addition, several witnesses reported seeing Lauren trailing Brown by four to five feet at various points of the trail, Hum said.

"There is no way that the defendant's story is true," Hum said. "And innocent people don't need to lie."

Brown, a former airline baggage handler at LAX accused of tossing Lauren off the cliff, is charged with one count of first-degree murder and the special circumstance allegations of lying in wait and killing for financial gain.

If convicted of the charge and allegations, he faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

At Brown's first trial three years ago in Torrance Superior Court, the jury deadlocked, with two voting for first-degree murder, eight favoring second-degree murder and two finding involuntary manslaughter.

Brown's attorney, Pat Harris, criticized the prosecution for dehumanizing Brown, omitting information favorable to the defense and spinning evidence to support its theory.

Harris asked jurors to think about what the prosecution is asking them to do: find that Brown committed an "incredible act" by throwing his daughter off the cliff.

Although some witnesses did testify that Brown would lose his temper and lash out with threats when he didn't get his way, Harris reminded the jury that his client was also described as thoughtful, loyal and a man who "took to" being a father once he learned Lauren was, indeed, his.

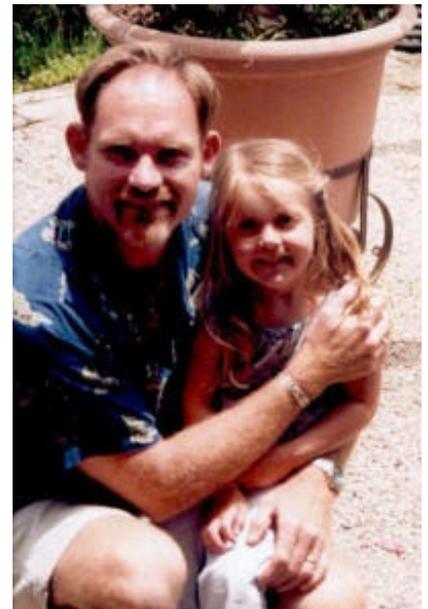
Harris also attacked the prosecution's theory that Brown failed to act appropriately - he was detached and unemotional, law enforcement officers said - in the wake of his daughter's death.

Harris argued that it would be "absurd" to kill Lauren and then not think to act hysterical or emotional if he were, in fact, trying to cover up what he had done.

"It makes no sense," Harris said. "It's doing the bank robbery and not having a getaway car."

Both attorneys recounted Lauren's injuries and how they related to the terrain of the cliff and the physics of falling versus being thrown - key evidence presented by experts from both sides during the trial.

Hum recalled the testimony of prosecution witnesses who said that, based on the lack of scratches and abrasions on Lauren's body, coupled with trajectory tests and the head injury she received, the only way she



could have gone over was to have been thrown.

Harris, though, showed the jury photos that he said showed numerous bruises on Lauren, including a large red splotch on her back that the medical examiner said was from the blood pooling after death.

"They just ignore those and they ignore the thing on the back," Harris said of the prosecution witnesses.

The attorneys also had different interpretations of the child support and custody dispute between Brown and Key-Marer in the months leading up to Lauren's death.

While Hum claims Brown wanted to get rid of Lauren because she was costing him too much money, Harris countered Brown was trying to spend more time with his daughter and even thought about the future with her.

Key-Marer became pregnant with Lauren shortly after she and Brown began dating. When the relationship became strained over money and disagreements over how to handle the pregnancy, they broke up. Lauren was less than a year old when Key-Marer filed for child support.

With the court staff off today for an unpaid furlough, the jury will return Thursday to begin deliberations.

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