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Cops: Girls Confined To Garage

Las Cruces Surgeon, Wife Charged With Child Abuse

By Rene Romo Journal Southern Bureau

LAS CRUCES — An orthopedic surgeon and his wife punished their daughters by confining them to the garage of their home in an upscale subdivision, leaving them there for days at a time with a sleeping bag, bread, peanut butter and a bottle of water and only a few breaks a day, police said.

Then, during the last two months, the father and stepmother left three of the four daughters — a 13-year-old and 15-year-old twins — unsupervised in a rented, unfurnished mobile home in a lower-income part of the city, Las Cruces police said.

Dr. Kenneth M. Yaw, 54, and his wife, Rita Starceski, 43, of Golf Club Road were arrested by Las Cruces police early Thursday and charged with seven counts each of third-degree intentional child abuse.

The pair were arraigned Thursday, not guilty pleas were entered, and each was released from Doña Ana County Detention Center after posting a secured bond of \$70,000.

The children were placed in the custody of the Children, Youth and Families Department and are in good condition, said police spokesman Dan Trujillo.

Neither Yaw nor Starceski could be reached for comment Friday. A young woman who cracked the door open at the couple's home said Yaw was not available.

The couple's three-bedroom, three-bath Sonoma Ranch home that overlooks a golf course has an appraised value of \$604,000, according to the Doña Ana County assessor's office. The aging mobile home at the Rancho Cielo Grande Mobile Home Park on Karen Avenue has bare walls and a ceiling warped by rain damage, and rents for a few hundred dollars a month, neighbors said.

On Friday, the living room of the mobile home contained a single recliner chair, and clothing and blankets were strewn on the floor.

"Welcome to your new home," Yaw said to his daughters after dropping them off there in early June, according to a police statement of facts filed with a criminal complaint.

After waking his daughters at 2 a.m. to drive them to the mobile home, Yaw left them with a bag of pinto beans, bread, flour, a jar of peanut butter, a pot and some disposable utensils, the complaint says.

The children had no radio or TV. The parents left them with a cell phone programmed to ring only Yaw's or Starceski's phone, and a pack of cards, neighbors said.

Cindy Aranda, a neighbor at the mobile home park, said she fed the girls, who said they were hungry, and let them sleep over at the twobedroom mobile home she shares with a husband and five children. She said the girls would leave early in the morning in case their father arrived to check on them.

Aranda said she feared for the children, who were home-schooled, because they were alone most of the time. "He could have done something else for punishment," Aranda said. "What if they continued to live like that and something bad happened to them?"

Yaw, a member of the Orthopedic and Neurosurgical Institute in Las Cruces, moved to the area late last year from Pennsylvania.

Yaw's 11-year-old daughter, the youngest, told police she was confined to the family's garage for four days and three nights because she "did not have their family dog on a leash and grabbed him by his collar," the police complaint says.

A 15-year-old daughter said she was confined to the family garage for a week for making a "mean" remark to her stepmother, the complaint said. The girl said she was allowed to leave home for a volunteer job at a hospital, but upon her return home she was confined to the garage.

A 13-year-old daughter was allegedly confined to the garage for two to three weeks for failing to do homework.

The children told police that, while confined to the garage, they were allowed to eat only bread and peanut butter. They were allowed to leave only three times a day to go to the bathroom or bathe, the criminal complaint says.

One daughter told police they were punished after she and two sisters took money from their mother's purse because they wanted to enroll in public school and "wear clothes like the other kids wear," the statement of facts says.

When Yaw discovered the theft on May 24, he called Las Cruces police and filed a complaint.

Last Tuesday, Yaw picked up one of the daughters and enrolled her at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, police said. Another daughter subsequently ran away, but she was located Thursday, Trujillo said.

Aranda said police learned the three daughters were being housed at the trailer park after Yaw himself called to report a domestic dispute.

Two mobile home park neighbors said they would ask the children about their father, but the girls were protective, saying he was not around because he was busy with work. "I guess that's what kids do," Aranda said.





RENE ROMO/JOURNAL Daughters of a Las Cruces surgeon were confined to the garage of this home for days at a time, police said.



A Las Cruces surgeon left his daughters in this mobile home in a lower-income area as punishment, police said.

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