

Daley nephew Vanecko pleads guilty in Koschman death

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Nanci Koschman had spent almost a decade waiting for this moment.

After a sleepless night, she sat in a Rolling Meadows courtroom Friday fighting back tears as Richard “R.J.” Vanecko, a nephew of former Mayor Richard Daley, turned to face her.

“I am sorry,” Vanecko declared. “If I could undo what was done, I would, but I can’t. I just want to extend my sincerest apology.”

Koschman mouthed back the words: “Thank you.”

Vanecko, 39, had just pleaded guilty to one felony count of involuntary manslaughter for throwing a single punch that mortally wounded Koschman’s son, David after a brief, drunken confrontation in the Rush Street night life district in April 2004.

McHenry County Judge Maureen McIntyre, called in to preside over the politically sensitive case, quickly imposed the sentence that Vanecko’s lawyers and a special prosecutor had agreed on: 60 days in jail, followed by 60 days of home confinement and then 2 1/2 years of probation. Vanecko also was required to pay \$20,000 in restitution to Koschman and issue an apology, something his attorneys said he’d long wanted to do.

The special prosecutor, former U.S. Attorney Dan Webb, said after court Friday that charges should have been filed a long time ago. But the case was only reopened -- and then closed again without charges -- in 2011 after an investigation by the Chicago Sun-Times raised questions if Chicago police had intentionally concealed evidence because of Vanecko’s clout.

A Cook County judge took the rare step of appointing Webb in April 2012 after finding “troubling questions” about both the initial and later investigations, including authorities’ ultimate conclusion that Vanecko -- 10 inches taller and 90 pounds heavier than Koschman -- had acted in self-defense even though he was never interviewed.

The special prosecutor indicted Vanecko in December 2012 and continued to investigate the conduct of police and prosecutors until last September when Webb balked at any further charges for statute-of-limitation reasons and evidentiary issues. The probe has cost taxpayers \$1.12 million, according to recent public filings.

Friday’s hearing was originally scheduled for McIntyre to rule on some disputes in advance of the Feb. 18 trial, but the two sides had worked out the plea deal in recent days. After the lawyers had conferred with the judge privately for a time, Koschman walked haltingly to a podium at the front of the courtroom, cleared her throat and began to read a statement of her own.

About how her son was “the light of my life and my heart and my soul.” How a part of her had perished when he died in 2004, 12 days after he was punched once in the face and fell back, hitting his head on a curb.

“I have never been out for revenge,” she said. “I just wanted an apology. I needed to hear ‘I’m sorry.’ I’ve said this many times and now I hope to hear those words. Will it bring back David? Of course not. But I have a little peace of mind knowing that I got justice for (him).”

Moments later, the words she’d been waiting so long to hear finally came.

“I have felt terrible about this since the moment I heard that David was injured,” said Vanecko, standing before the judge in a gray suit and striped tie. “When I found out he had passed, I was shocked. I can’t imagine the pain and the suffering that Ms. Koschman went through.”

Vanecko then turned to deliver his apology to Koschman, who fought back tears as one of her attorneys, G. Flint Taylor, put a hand on her shoulder.

A brief written statement summed up what the two sides could agree on about the events of that early morning on April 25, 2004. David Koschman and a group of friends were walking in the Rush Street area when they “crossed paths” with Vanecko and three of his friends and got into a “verbal altercation.”

Vanecko punched Koschman once in the face and then ran away with a friend. The two got into a cab before reuniting with his two other friends at the Pepper Canister bar in the 500 block of North Wells Street.

After court, Nanci Kospchman told reporters she agreed with the sentence given to Vanecko and planned to visit her son’s grave to tell him their battle was over. “This fight was for you, honey,” she said, raising her eyes. “Tell Daddy we did it.”

Koschman said she still wants answers about what happened with her son’s case and why it took years and so much public pressure before anything was done.

“I think definitely something got dropped along the way because I shouldn’t be here 9 1/2 years later doing this,” she said.

Many of the answers could come in a 192-page report prepared by Webb but sealed before trial because of potentially explosive revelations that could have impaired Vanecko’s right to a fair trial. Webb told reporters Friday that he planned to ask Judge Michael Toomin to unseal the report as soon as Monday.

Webb said he insisted that Vanecko serve time in jail even though most “single-punch” cases end with probation.

“It was important to me as a prosecutor because David Koschman died. And even though I was respectful of the fact that it was a spontaneous act that last three or four seconds, the consequences were horrific.”

Vanecko had faced anywhere from probation to five years in prison if convicted at trial.

One of Vanecko’s attorneys, Thomas Breen, said his client was a hard-working millwright who was “a good human being” who likely would’ve gotten along well with Koschman if they had met under different circumstances.

“He’s been made out by some to be a villan because of his size, his heritage or whatever reason,” Breen told the judge. “He didn’t do anything with the intent to harm anyone.”

Vanecko’s attorneys have asked that he serve his jail sentence, set to begin Feb. 14, at the McHenry County Jail.

They told the judge they expected Vanecko, who resides in California, would serve his period of home confinement

in Cook County.

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