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Md. judge heard 'shocking' evidence in divorce case hours before his killing, tapes show

Associated Press

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HAGERSTOWN – Pedro Argote was conspicuously absent last Thursday when a Maryland judge granted his wife a divorce and sole custody of their four children, citing "shocking" testimony about the abuse that Argote allegedly inflicted upon them for years.

After that day, authorities say, Argote showed up at Judge Andrew Wilkinson's home and shot him to death in his driveway. Now a wanted man, Argote remains at large amid a law enforcement search spanning several states.

Maryland judge killed: Everything you need to know
(https://thedailyrecord.com/2023/10/24/maryland-judge-killed-everything-you-need-to-know/)

Wilkinson ruled against Argote after hearing testimony from his wife and an adult daughter, who said he controlled every aspect of their lives, keeping them isolated and subjecting them to various acts of violence in recent years.

Police have pointed to the judge's decision as a motive for the shooting, which sent a shock wave through Maryland's legal community. An audio recording of the hearing didn't capture any obvious warning signs that Argote posed a danger to anyone in his family, but it does provide new insight into the abuse allegations he was facing.

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His adult daughter from a previous relationship said she spent most of her teenage years confined to her bedroom. She said Argote had cameras installed throughout the house and was "watching my every move." During emotional testimony, she said he would beat her with a belt and other objects — "whatever he had close by."

"The reason I worked up the courage to testify was so that my siblings wouldn't have to go through the mental torment that I currently have," she told the court, explaining that she left home at 18 to escape the abuse and hadn't had contact with her father since.

Wilkinson concluded that Argote wasn't fit to have custody of his four younger children, ages 12, 11, 5 and 3.

"The manner in which Mr. Argote has isolated these children and mom over the past two years, I think that has gone on throughout the marriage, and it's shocking," the judge said. "I think he is abusive in multiple ways."

Argote's wife described in detail how he rendered her powerless and mistreated their children. She said while recounting how he would stuff a towel into their crying baby's mouth. The conditions only worsened after he found out she planned to leave him last year, she said.

Before she could get the paperwork together, Argote filed for divorce himself. Court records show a messy legal battle ensued and Argote's abuse escalated, according to court testimony.

Argote's wife requested a protective order soon thereafter, saying Argote was carrying a gun and surveilling her. But they later settled on a "nesting arrangement" where he would live on the first floor of their house and she would live upstairs.

Throughout their marriage, Argote handled the family's finances and controlled their joint business ventures, including most recently a food truck and a digital advertising company. He also limited his wife's access to their shared vehicle, according to court documents.

In a March 2023 written opinion, Wilkinson said he had "the uneasy sense that Father engages in absolute control over Mother, their finances, and their lives." The judge again referenced that statement Thursday, saying his prior assessment became "crystal clear" during recent testimony.

Exhibits filed into the court record include photos of Argote smiling and posing with his children, riding bikes and swimming. In one photo, two of his children are sitting in their driveway next to a sidewalk chalk message that reads: "I love you Dad."

In an Oct. 11 email sent to his wife's attorney, Argote said he had purchased her an SUV and left it outside her house. But the attorney told him to remove it and instead make available their shared vehicle.

"You cannot force a vehicle upon my client," the attorney wrote in an emailed response to Argote. "This is not a sensible solution. ... You have failed to pay the mortgage, but have taken on another liability."

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The recent divorce hearing lasted two days. During the first half, which took place Sept. 26, Argote represented himself. He testified about the couple's finances and repeatedly questioned whether his children were receiving adequate homeschooling instruction from their mother, claiming she was too lenient with them. During his testimony, Argote at times expressed frustration, but his voice remained calm and he often addressed the judge respectfully as "your honor."

But Argote failed to appear for the second half of the hearing last week. Instead, he called the courthouse saying he had a headache.

"I'm not sure that I find that believable," Wilkinson said, explaining his decision to proceed.

Erika Garrott Johnson, the attorney representing Argote's wife, said she believes Argote didn't come to court because he didn't want to hear his family's emotional testimony "and because he knows the writing is on the wall."

An attorney representing the children, Ashley Wilburn, said she was concerned for their safety, "particularly in light of the fact that Mr. Argote did not show up today."

She urged the judge to resolve the case quickly in hopes of keeping the children safe, saying the best case scenario for them would likely be moving to Florida with their mom, who has a family support system there. Wilburn said even supervised access to their father would be "detrimental."

The judge ruled out visitation rights Thursday and barred Argote from contacting his children or visiting the family's house.

Wilkinson was shot in his driveway Thursday night while his wife and son were home. The circuit court judge was a longtime resident of Hagerstown and heavily involved in the community. The city of nearly 44,000 lies about 75 miles northwest of Baltimore in the largely rural panhandle of Maryland.

Sheriff's deputies found Argote's Mercedes SUV in a wooded area south of Hagerstown on Friday, but concluded he wasn't in the area.

Officials with the U.S. Marshal Service said he has ties to other states, including New York and Florida.

Argote's wife and children are receiving protection as the search for him continues, according to Washington County Sheriff Brian Albert.

Lea Skene and Michael Kunzelman report for The Associated Press.

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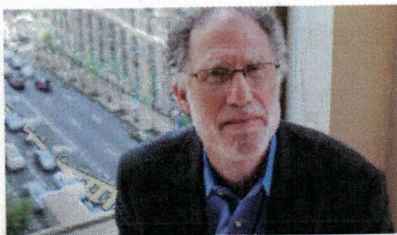
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