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Display is on solid footing

Galveston campaign for child abuse awareness attracts attention outside, protest inside courthouse

By Ruth Rendon

GALVESTON - The shoes hanging from trees around the Galveston County courthouse come in all colors and sizes to represent the hundreds of Galveston County child abuse victims last year. The symbolic gesture, however, led a defense attorney to call for a mistrial Thursday in a child abuse case being heard at the courthouse, fearing that the display would be prejudicial to his client's case.

State District Judge John Ellisor denied attorney Tad Nelson's request for a mistrial but issued a court order at noon Thursday for the removal of the shoes on the south side of the courthouse, which is where jurors would enter the building.

The hanging of the 680 pairs of children's shoes was approved by the Galveston County Commissioners Court to commemorate April as Child Abuse Awareness Month.

"They (commissioners) accepted our idea of hanging 680 pairs of old children's shoes from trees at the courthouse to visually dramatize the scope of the problem," said Dr. William Buffum, executive director of the Family Service Center of Galveston County. The center provides counseling for children and families in need.

Last year, Galveston County had 680 confirmed cases of child abuse. Two cases resulted in death, Buffum said.

When Buffum learned of Ellisor's order he went to the judge's courtroom, and after further discussions, the judge, prosecutor and Nelson agreed that the shoes could remain hung on the trees. Ellisor asked that no more be hung on the south side of the courthouse.

"We're satisfied, and the display is going on," Buffum said. "Everybody agrees that child abuse is a critical issue, and the county has supported that."

Deedee Gregorie and others with the Family Service Center began hanging shoes at the courthouse Wednesday morning. With the help of ladders, the group is adorning every tree and two arbors at the courthouse complex at 722 Moody.

"We're getting a lot of people to stop and ask questions about what we're doing," said Gregorie, clinical director for the counseling center. "That's good because we want to tell people about the child abuse problem."

Some passers-by have offered to donate money toward child-abuse prevention programs, she said.

Gregorie said she got the idea of hanging shoes after seeing a similar display in Bastrop County. Children's shoes also are being hung around the Liberty County courthouse this weekend.

The trial of Raymond Arthur Henry III, charged with injury to a child, is ongoing in Ellisor's court.