

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Inmate to deputies: 'You're killing me'

By [RACHANEE SRISAVASDI](#)

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SANTA ANA – Michael Lass, pinned down on the jailhouse floor, muttered: "You're killing me."

Those were his last words. Later that day, on Oct. 12, 2007, the 28-year-old Santa Ana resident was declared dead at St. Joseph's Hospital after a struggle with several sheriff's deputies at Orange County Jail.

On Wednesday, the jury watched portions of the videotaped struggle that led to Lass's death. Lass, of Portola Hills, was serving a five-day sentence at the jail for being drunk in public and not appearing at a hearing.

[Lass's father, Frederick](#), sued the County of Orange, as well as six sheriff's deputies — Si Page, William Rodriguez, Charles Foote, Matthew Stafford, Mario Castro and Mark Wehri — over the death. He blamed deputies' excessive force for his son's demise, and is seeking monetary damages.

Opening statements in the federal trial, which is being held in the courtroom of U.S. District Judge James V. Selna, were given Wednesday. The trial is expected to last until the end of the month.

The confrontation occurred after Lass called for medical help, and was ordered out of his cell, said the father's attorney, Thomas Ardeef.

Deputies tackled Lass to the floor, and then stunned Lass nine times and also beat him, he added.

"While he's laying on that floor, (deputies) put body pressure on him. His last words spoken was 'You're killing me.'" Ardeef said. "After that, you can see he's unconscious or dead."

Norman Watkins, the lawyer for the county and deputies, offered a different version of events.

Deputies encountered "violent resistance" from Lass, who sparked the struggle when he touched a deputy's hands, causing a deputy to tackle him to the floor, Watkins said.

When he was on the floor, Lass tucked his hands underneath him so deputies couldn't pull them out, he added.

The autopsy report lists Lass's cause of death as cardiac arrest from prolonged agitation and prolonged stress, Watkins said. This was caused by a state of "excited delirium," he added.

"That day, several inmates said (Lass) was acting strange. He seemed to be going from withdrawal from alcohol, or hallucinating," Watkins said.

The struggle isn't clearly documented on the videotapes.

During one scene, a deputy yells: "Do you like resisting?"

"Love it," Lass answers.

Lass swears, and then asks deputies to shoot him in another scene.

"Anybody got a gun? Come on. We got a little bit of blood here," he said.

The struggle was investigated by the Orange County District Attorney's Office. Prosecutors determined in August 2008 that deputies were not criminally culpable for Lass's death.

The assault came about a year after the much publicized jail beating death of John Chamberlain in Theo Lacy Jail in October 2006. Inmates beat Chamberlain, who was in jail for possession of child pornography, because they mistakenly believed he was a child molester.

Several sheriff's officials left the department because of criticism surrounding Chamberlain's death, which also led to reforms in sheriff's department jails.

Contact the writer: 714-834-3773 or rsrisavasdi@ocregister.com

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