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By JAMES W. WADE III

Staff Reporter

An electrical cord, a shoulder strap, a piece of cloth and a belt were used to strangle four victims of a man charged with killing 11 women and dumping their bodies around his house, a retired coroner testified Tuesday.

Dr. Elizabeth Balraj, who did more than 5,000 autopsies before she retired as Cuyahoga County coroner, testified on the five autopsies she did in the murder trial of Anthony Sowell.

Sowell, a convicted sex offender, has pleaded not guilty and could face the death penalty if

convicted.

Balraj testified that Tonia Carmichael, 52, was strangled with an electrical cord; Amelda Hunter, 46, with a shoulder strap; Crystal Dozier, 38; with a piece of cloth; and Janice Webb, 48, with a green belt.

Three victims were buried in Sowell's backyard and the fourth was found under a pile of dirt in Sowell's basement.

The fifth case handled by Balraj involved the skull of Leshanda Long, 25, which was found in a pink plastic bucket in the basement of Sowell's house.

With only the skull available, Balraj told the jury that she had considered the overall case in ruling that Long's death was caused by homicidal violence.

"We have to take into consideration other information," said Balraj, such as toxicology reports, a person's medical records and evidence gathered by police.

Balraj methodically reviewed her autopsy reports in each death and explained photos, including one showing the skull, bucket and brown bag in which it was taken to the morgue, as well as a photo of the skull alone.

The bucket also held pieces of lint, gravel and dust and showed evidence of non-human bite marks around the edge, Balraj testified.

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With each finding of a death caused by "asphyxia by cervical compression due to ligature strangulation," she added, "in other words, she was strangled."

The victims, many struggling with addictions and troubled lives, disappeared starting in October 2007. The last one vanished in September 2009. The bodies were found in late 2009 when police went to Sowell's house on a sex-assault complaint.

Forensic scientist with the Washington State Highway Patrol Kristopher Kern took the stand for the prosecutors, while he has been in Seattle since 2010, before that he did trace evidence with the Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's office.

Kern said he removed two shirts and a sock from the body of Janice Webb for trace evidence. Insect casings were found on the shirts. Kern said he removed two white shoelaces that were tied together, which were used to bind Webb's wrists.

"Notice there are white and red twisty ties there. The shoelaces were bound so tightly, that I actually had to cut them," Kern said.

The body of Nancy Cobbs was wrapped in five layers of plastic bags and a blanket, Kern testified. The plastic bags varied in size. Kern also removed two socks and a pair of pants from the body for trace evidence.

Kern said an approximately 36-inch shoelace and a 12 inch long sock were both removed from around her neck, as well as another shoelace from the wrists.

While discussing the remains of Tishana Culver, Kern said he removed one brown apparent sock from her wrist, as well as another piece of fabric. There was a 48-inch multi-colored fabric brought in with the remains.

She was wearing a brown dress, brown pants, shirt and socks, when her remains were

recovered from the attic crawlspace of Sowell's Imperial Avenue home.

The body of Kim Smith, who was the last to be found in the backyard, was wrapped in translucent plastic. Forensic scientist Kristopher Kern said she had two 12-inch pieces of twine wrapped around her ankles and wrists.

“I cannot conduct DNA testing, but I can collect it,” Kern said. He said some of the plastic bags were sent to the FBI for fingerprint testing, but he was unaware of those results.

After presenting close to 150 witnesses, the prosecution is expected to rest it’s case soon.