



Jury recommends death for 2013 St. Petersburg houseboat killer

Jurors unanimously concluded Reynaldo Figueroa-Sanabria should die by lethal injection for killing John Travlos and Germana Morin

LARGO — Once jurors found Reynaldo Figueroa-Sanabria guilty last week of two murders, there were only two possible sentences:

Life or death.

On Tuesday, after only about two hours of deliberation, the jury unanimously decided Figueroa-Sanabria should die. It was the first recommendation for death in the Pinellas-Pasco circuit since Florida changed its death penalty law in 2017 to require unanimous jury decisions.

The relatively quick decision from the jury followed what amounted to self-sabotage on the part of Figueroa-Sanabria — he had fired his lawyers, preventing them from making any arguments to try to save his life.

Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Judge Pat Siracusa set a hearing for January when he will consider the jury's recommendation and sentence Figueroa-Sanabria.

The 47-year-old stood alongside his lawyers in a checkered blue shirt and buzzed hair, having abandoned the bun he wore throughout the trial. His expression did not waver as the court clerk read the jury's findings. Last week, the same jury decided Figueroa-Sanabria was guilty of two counts of first-degree murder in the April 12, 2013 slayings of John Travlos and Germana "Geri" Morin aboard Travlos' houseboat, which was moored at the Loggerhead Marina near Pinellas Point in St. Petersburg.

Reynaldo Figueroa-Sanabria, 47, stood in the court room as his death sentence was read aloud. He'll be formally sentenced in January. [DIRK SHADD | Tampa Bay Times]

Figueroa-Sanabria had worked for Travlos as a handyman aboard the vessel, named Relax-Inn, and had befriended the couple. Prosecutors argued he killed the pair over their jewelry.

The five relatives and friends of Travlos who sat in the front row behind prosecutors hung their heads, and one was rocking or sobbing as the clerk read the jury's decision. A victim advocate rested her hand on the shoulder of Travlos' granddaughter.

In the hallway after the sentence was read aloud, Travlos' stepson Robert Doherty said the jury's decision didn't bring him any satisfaction. He recalled the pictures he endured during the trial of his stepfather lying dead on the floor of the boat.

"Nothing brings satisfaction for that," Doherty said. "It's not going to bring him back."

The decision came after a roller coaster of events for the legal teams in the case.

Jurors convicted Figueroa-Sanabria last week, setting off a four-day period for the lawyers to prep for the penalty phase of the trial. After a guilty verdict in cases in which prosecutors seek the death penalty, lawyers must present evidence called aggravating and mitigating factors to help sway the jury to choose life or death.

Before the penalty phase began Monday morning, Figueroa-Sanabria fired his lawyers, court-appointed private attorneys Danny Hernandez and Keith Hammond, choosing to represent himself. The two attorneys remained at his side on standby.

Prosecutors called a doctor and presented evidence to prove six aggravating factors, including that the murders were "especially heinous, atrocious or cruel" and that he killed the pair for financial gain and to avoid arrest. Two family members also read to the jury victim-impact statements.

Figueroa-Sanabria did not ask the doctor any questions on cross examination.

When it was Figueroa-Sanabria's turn to present mitigating factors, he declined to make a case. Hernandez and Hammond had brought in doctors from Miami and California, and had other witnesses ready on Skype and in the courthouse. In total, they planned to present two mitigating factors — that Figueroa-Sanabria experienced severe mental stress and that he was unable to appreciate the criminality of his actions because of brain damage — over two days of testimony. All the preparation was rendered moot.

"Intensive work for four days all culminating yesterday in the downward spiral," Hammond said.

Ripplinger said Figueroa-Sanabria told Siracusa that he was innocent, and therefore didn't want to unnecessarily drag his family's history into the courtroom. And he didn't want the mental health experts to testify.

"He said he didn't want to beg the jury," Ripplinger said.

Jurors began deliberating Monday afternoon before they were let go for the evening after only about 75 minutes. They returned Tuesday morning and continued deliberating for less than an hour before reaching their decision. Jurors found that five of the six aggravating factors applied. They had no mitigating factors to consider.

After Siracusa thanked the jury profusely for their month-long service and released them, the judge asked Figueroa-Sanabria if he had anything to say.

“I didn’t kill those people,” he said, reasserting his innocence.

The unanimous threshold has made it harder for prosecutors to earn death penalty recommendations from juries. Adam Matos, who was convicted in 2017 of murdering his ex-girlfriend, her parents and her new boyfriend years earlier in Pasco County, was sentenced to life in prison. Eleven jurors wished to sentence him to death, but one juror held out.

And in the case against Marco Antonio Parilla Jr., who pleaded guilty to shooting dead Tarpon Springs police officer Charles Kondek in 2014, two jurors declined to send Parilla to death row.

A number of factors contributed to the Figueroa-Sanabria case taking more than six years to reach trial, including attorney changeover after two previous prosecutors on the case before Ripplinger became judges, and Figueroa-Sanabria wanting to represent himself. Hammond said delaying the case was also strategic, to ensure it was tried under the new unanimous death penalty rules.

“Which I achieved,” Hammond said. “Now that’s all down the drain.”

Source:

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