



Florida Supreme Court throws out death penalty of man who killed Lake County woman

The Florida Supreme Court on Thursday threw out the death penalty for three murderers, including a man convicted of abducting an 81-year-old Lake County woman from a Publix parking lot and killing her in 2010.

The decisions are the latest in a growing string of rulings since October, when the state's highest court declared Florida's death-penalty statute unconstitutional.

In those three Thursday opinions, as with earlier ones, the court ruled that because jurors did not unanimously vote for death, the defendants must be resentenced.

In the Lake County case involving Donald Otis Williams, the jury vote for death was 9-3.

He was found guilty of murder, kidnapping and robbery a few months after the victim, Janet Patrick, disappeared while loading groceries into her car in Leesburg on Oct. 19, 2010.

Williams, 56, was arrested several days later sitting in her car with her credit cards in his pocket.

He was on sex-offender probation at the time.

Inside the car, authorities found two pairs of underwear. A crime lab found DNA from both Williams and Patrick on them. Hairs found in them also matched both the defendant and victim.

Patrick's body — nude except for a pair of socks — was found a week later in Polk County, near where Williams used to live.

Her remains were badly decomposed, and a medical examiner could not determine the cause of death but ruled it a homicide.

The high court on Thursday upheld Williams' conviction but overturned his sentence.

It also ordered the resentencing of Lancelot Armstrong, convicted of murdering a deputy in Broward County in 1990; and William Kopsho, convicted of murdering his estranged wife in Marion County in 2000.

Jurors must vote 12-0 for death, the court wrote, and unanimously identify the specific reasons why a defendant should be put to death and why those reasons outweigh arguments that he should be spared.

In a fourth death-penalty case Thursday, the high court let stand the sentence of Louis B. Gaskin, convicted of shooting a Volusia County couple in 1989.

Florida has not executed an inmate since January 2016 because of rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court and the Florida Supreme Court that the state's death-penalty statute is unconstitutional.

State Sen. Randolph Bracy, D-Orlando, has introduced a bill in Tallahassee that would require a 12-0 jury vote in death cases.

It could be approved once the legislative session begins March 7.

Source:

<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/breaking-news/os-florida-death-penalty-donald-williams-20170119-story.html>