



Man takes plea, gets life in dad's burning death

BARTOW - Ronald Wayne Harris Jr. was sentenced Monday to life imprisonment without parole for burning his father to death.

The 39-year-old Davenport man accepted a plea deal rather than go to trial later this year.

Prosecutors had been seeking the death penalty.

Harris' court-appointed lawyers, Julia Williamson and Kevin Humphries, noted an insanity defense was a possibility in his case.

"He has a history of mental health issues," Williamson said.

Harris' father, Ronald Harris Sr., had traveled to Polk County from Maryland to help his son with his mental health problems, she said.

Harris' mother urged her son's legal team to take the case to trial and seek a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity, Williamson said.

However, Harris was "very adamant" that he didn't want to go to trial, she said.

Harris pleaded guilty to first-degree arson and first-degree murder in the death of his 58-year-old father.

The attack took place on the evening of Aug. 22, 2010, at the home on King George Drive in Davenport where Harris Jr. was living, according to investigative reports by the Polk County Sheriff's Office.

Harris later told detectives that he and his father were arguing about "material things," reports state.

Harris Jr. splashed a mixture of bleach and gasoline on his father's chest and face then set him ablaze, reports state.

Harris Sr. ran outside, and neighbors used a hose to douse the flames, reports state.

Harris Sr. told an eyewitness that his son set him on fire, reports state.

Harris Jr. was found hours later behind the Shamrock Pub near U.S. 27 and Interstate 4.

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