

Hummert convicted in wife's murder

Jurors' decision divides family

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Wife-killer Brian David Hummert took the gamble of his life when, apparently unhappy with an imposed 20- to 40-year prison sentence, he withdrew his guilty plea to third-degree murder and bet a jury would let him off easier than a judge.

Wednesday, he lost that bet when a jury convicted him of first-degree murder. And unless he can prevail on appeal, he'll be paying for the rest of his life, because the charge carries a mandatory life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Hummert, 50, was convicted of strangling his wife of 22 years in their 10 Boeing Road home on March 19, 2004. Jurors also found him guilty of hindering his own apprehension or prosecution. Because the jury convicted on those two charges, they didn't need to make determinations on lesser charges of third-degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, tampering with or fabricating physical evidence and false identification to police.

Sentencing is set for Nov. 30.

The body of Charlene Hummert, 48, was found on March 21, 2004, stuffed in the rear cargo area of her Land Rover in the parking lot of Giant Food Store in Fairview Township.

Family and friends of Charlene who packed the courtroom during the weeklong trial smiled in relief when the verdict was read; at least one family member shed tears.

Hummert's children react: As they did when their father pleaded guilty and was sentenced in late 2005, David Hummert and Tracey Hummert sat on opposite sides of the courtroom. Tracey, 21, supports her father while David, 22, wants to see him pay.

"(It's) complete crap," Tracey said of the verdict. "I think he's absolutely innocent."

Asked why her father would have pleaded guilty if he hadn't committed the crime, Tracey repeated claims Brian Hummert previously made to presiding Judge John C. Uhler that his attorneys lied to him and told him it would be easier.

Tracey also said she believes her father was protecting her, David and their younger brother, Dean, who is still a juvenile.

"I'm still visiting him (in prison) and I still love him," she said of her dad.

David said he has no plans to visit his father and said he's relieved his father will be locked up for the rest of his life.

"He's a monster," David said. "He's going to get what he deserves."

A family divided: David said he hopes to someday reconcile with his sister, but only if she acknowledges their father is a killer.

Otherwise, he said, "there's no middle ground" for reconciliation.

"I think she's living in a fantasy world," David said. "(But) she's still my sister. If she needs me ... I'll still be there for her. It's definitely pulled the family apart."

After the verdict, chief deputy prosecutor Chuck Patterson sat in what he dubbed "the war room" with lead Detective Jason Loper of Fairview Township Police and co-counsel Carrie Wirsing.

"I'm thrilled we got the verdict we did," Loper said.

Forensic testimony: The team, which also included state police Cpl. George Cronin, used the conference room throughout the trial to strategize.

"It was no walk in the park," Patterson said of the lengthy trial, which featured extensive testimony from expert witnesses about computer equipment, soil-sample comparisons, DNA and handwriting analysis.

"Juries have come to rely upon what they see on 'Law & Order' and 'CSI,'" but television shows don't always reflect real crime investigations, he said.

"We just hoped we'd done everything we could have to persuade the jury," Patterson said. "There was always the equal likelihood the jury could have found him guilty of third(-degree murder)."

The price of justice: Patterson talked about the forensic experts some world-renowned who testified, including trace-evidence expert Skip Palenik of Illinois, who has worked on high-profile cases including those of Green River Killer Gary Ridgway and murder victim JonBenet Ramsey.

Palenik concluded soil drag marks on Charlene's sweatpants matched soil from the Hummerts' driveway.

And Robert Leonard of Hofstra University in New York - a founding member of doo-wop group Sha Na Na who performed at Woodstock - is a renowned expert in the emerging science of forensic linguistics.

He testified there were "striking" and "unusual" similarities between Brian Hummert's linguistic quirks and those found in letters written to police and a reporter by a purported "serial killer" who claimed he killed Charlene.

"It's cutting-edge stuff," Patterson said.

The case was not cheap to put on, he said, but "what's the price of justice?"

Hollywood comes calling: Patterson said the Court TV show "Forensic Files" has contacted him, interested in featuring the Hummert case in an episode. And "48 Hours" had shown interest as well, he said.

Chief public defender Bruce Blocher conceded the prosecution had "quite a bit" of evidence, albeit primarily circumstantial, against his client. He said that in his closing argument Tuesday, he didn't intend to point the finger of blame at David Hummert, but rather suggest there were possible suspects other than Brian Hummert.

"It is what I had to work with," he said.

Blocher said his client will appeal.

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