

Hankins guilty of murder - Jury will decide on death penalty next week

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DAYTONA BEACH - Jurors took 3 1/2 hours Friday to find Dwayne Hankins guilty of killing police informant Harold Rouse in a New Smyrna Beach park in 2002.

They will decide next week whether Hankins should be put to death.

With friends and family of both men taking up three rows on either side of Circuit Judge R. Michael Hutcheson's courtroom, emotions ran high.

Rouse's mother, Sandra Rouse, began crying as the verdict - guilty as charged of first-degree murder - was read. On the other side of the courtroom, where Hankins' family and friends had sat through the weeklong trial, Rebecca Harris, his live-in girlfriend, burst into tears.

Hankins, 27, who had testified Thursday that he had nothing to do with the June 13, 2002, shooting death of Rouse, held his head with one hand and sobbed quietly. One of his lawyers said Hankins had trouble getting to his feet when the trial ended.

Hankins' family left without commenting. Outside the courtroom, Rouse's father, Harold Rouse Sr., 58, held his wife and said, "Thank God almighty."

"He killed my son," Rouse said. "No doubt, he killed my boy . . . he shot him in cold blood."

Hankins and Rouse, 25, grew up in the same New Smyrna Beach neighborhood. Prosecutor Ed Davis said the murder was a revenge killing. In late 2000, Rouse worked as a police informant, helping police gather evidence to arrest Hankins for selling cocaine.

Hankins was to start a three-year prison sentence stemming from that arrest about a month after Rouse was killed; he now faces a possible death penalty.

Defense attorneys Peyton Quarles and Bradley Sherman argued there was no physical evidence or testimony addressing the moments leading to the shooting and no eyewitnesses who saw the murder take place.

But Davis used Rouse's own words naming Hankins as his killer. The "dying declaration" was captured on police videotape as Rouse lay mortally wounded after being shot four times.

"Harold Rouse was an eyewitness to his murder," Davis said during his closing arguments. "Harold Rouse spent the last few agonizing minutes of his life doing everything he could to identify his murderer."

The jurors also heard testimony from police officers who heard Rouse name Hankins as the shooter and from others who said they heard Hankins make threats to harm Rouse.

Obviously, we're satisfied," Davis said after the verdict, reserving further comment until after Hankins is sentenced.

When the jury returns Thursday, they will choose life in prison or death for Hankins, said Linda Pruitt, a spokeswoman for the State Attorney's Office.

Quarles said they will appeal.

While Harold Rouse Sr. felt justice was served, he does not want Hankins to get the death penalty.

"I don't want to see him die," he said. "I just wanted justice for my son."

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