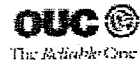


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Prisoner says he wants to die

The killer on death row faces a fight from his own attorney.

By Anthony Colarossi
Sentinel Staff Writer

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Sonny Ray Jeffries wants to die.

Now.

In the dozen years since he stomped his brother's landlady to death while stealing her jewelry, Jeffries fought hard to avoid his arrest, conviction and execution for the murder.

But after six miserable years on death row, Jeffries, 41, now says he's tired of fighting and wants to drop all his appeals. He wants to end it all with a lethal injection.

All that stands in his way is his defense attorney, who is trying to convince Orange County Circuit Judge Bob Wattles that Jeffries is mentally ill -- incapable of making his own decisions.

During a three-hour hearing Wednesday in Orlando, Jeffries repeatedly objected to attorney Daphney Gaylord's attempts to keep him out of the death chamber.

"This is not a hearing. This is ludicrous, the questions she is asking," said Jeffries, interrupting Gaylord's cross-examination of a state doctor who says Jeffries is competent to make his own decisions.

The odd case of a man condemned to die, but powerless to get to the death chamber fast enough, played out before Wattles, the same judge who sentenced Jeffries to death for the 1993 slaying of Wilma Martin. The state Supreme Court has already rejected one of Jeffries' appeals and, almost two years ago, Jeffries told Wattles he wanted to stop his attorneys from filing any more appeals.

That kicked off a series of court hearings and mental evaluations that all led up to Wednesday's hearing. Now it is up to Wattles to decide whether Jeffries -- who once claimed untreated gonorrhea drove him mad before he killed Martin -- is mentally sound enough to waive his future appeals.

Dr. Joe Thornton, a psychiatrist with the state Department of Children & Families, testified that he evaluated Jeffries in January and determined that he was competent and could make decisions about his capital case. Another state doctor is set to testify that he has come to the same conclusion.

When the hearing resumes in late March, Gaylord is set to present her own witnesses who are expected to testify that Jeffries is mentally incompetent.

Whether or not Jeffries is mentally ill has been the cornerstone of the case since he and Harry Thomas robbed and killed Martin, 68, in her Orlando home in August 1993. Thomas pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

It took almost five years for Jeffries to go to trial in the case because he was sent to a state mental hospital twice. Finally, in 1998, a jury found Jeffries guilty of killing Martin, who rented a house to his brother.

Jeffries represented himself during the trial. After his conviction, he admitted killing Martin but said the sexually transmitted disease drove him mad.

"County jail administrations, prison administrations and hospital administrations are all responsible because they should have helped and treated me years ago," Jeffries told Wattles at the time.

Mental-health experts who questioned Jeffries in 1998 said he was schizophrenic. But they didn't connect his mental illness with gonorrhea.

On Wednesday, Thornton said Jeffries exhibited an "anti-social personality" and noted that he could be at odds with his attorney but was mentally competent to assist in his own defense.

"I felt he was competent," Thornton said.

While cross-examining Thornton, Gaylord reminded him of Jeffries' mental-health history.

That line of questioning clearly infuriated Jeffries.

He repeatedly interrupted his attorney with emotional outbursts.

He called Gaylord's questioning of Thornton "repetitive" and "an insult to my character."

At one point, Jeffries asked to cross-examine Gaylord, but Wattles denied the request.

At another point, Jeffries, who is white, argued that Gaylord, who is black, "is racist toward me."

"I want a lawyer change," Jeffries said.

Wattles listened to Jeffries' objections but didn't rule on them. He told Jeffries he would get a chance to talk later in the hearing.

Jeffries will have to wait a little longer. The hearing ended abruptly Wednesday when Gaylord became ill and could not continue. The hearing will continue later this month.

Until then, Jeffries will have to wait it out -- in his death-row cell.

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