

Female murderer Cole receives death sentence

She will join two of her three partners on state's Death Row.

By Paul Pinkham, The Times-Union

The lone woman convicted in the murders of a disabled Jacksonville couple who were buried alive played a key role in their killings and should be put to death, a judge ordered Thursday.

The sentence will make Tiffany Ann Cole, 26, the only woman on Florida's Death Row. Two of her co-defendants also have been sentenced to death.

"All of these defendants got exactly what they deserved," said Chief Assistant State Attorney Jay Plotkin, who tried all three cases. "Justice was done."

Cole's lawyers argued that she wasn't a major participant in the 2005 robbery, kidnapping and murders of Carol and Reggie Sumner, both 61. They said she was under the control of her boyfriend, Michael James Jackson, who masterminded the murder plot.

But Circuit Judge Michael Weatherby disagreed, noting that Cole held a flashlight when a grave was pre-dug near St. George, Ga., and was present when the Sumners were driven there bound and gagged in the trunk of their car. She knew the Sumners, who were friends of her parents and introduced them to their killers.

The judge said she purchased the duct tape and gloves and later pawned jewelry and other items stolen from the Sumners' home. During a phone call to Jacksonville police while the killers were at large, Cole impersonated Carol Sumner in a failed attempt to convince detectives the Sumners were still alive.

"She was thoroughly involved," Weatherby said. "She knew exactly what she was doing and participated without hesitation."

The last Jacksonville woman sentenced to death was Andrea Hicks Jackson, 50, who fatally shot a police officer in 1983. She later was re-sentenced to life.

Florida has executed two women since re-instating the death penalty: serial killer Aileen Wuornos in 2002 and Judy Buenoano, convicted of poisoning her husband, in 1998.

"Whether you label it chauvinism or chivalry, judges and juries are very hesitant to sentence women to death," said Robert Batey, who teaches criminal law at Stetson University College of Law.

Florida State University College of Law professor Wayne Logan said other factors are that women tend to commit fewer premeditated or heinous murders and don't usually have lengthy criminal records. Both are factors that juries and judges can weigh in favor of imposing a death sentence.

Cole didn't have a "substantial" record, but Weatherby found the murders were heinous and premeditated. Jurors recommended 9-3 that she be executed.

Cole will go to Lowell Correctional Annex near Ocala, where the Department of Corrections has three women's Death Row cells. One is occupied by Virginia Larzelere, who is awaiting a new sentencing hearing in the 1991 murder-for-hire of her husband in Edgewater. Last week, the Florida Supreme Court upheld a judge's 2005 ruling undoing Larzelere's death sentence on grounds that her trial lawyers were ineffective.

Cole briefly bowed her head, then turned and mouthed "I love you" to her weeping mother as Weatherby announced his sentence. Death penalty cases are automatically reviewed by the Florida Supreme Court.

Her court-appointed attorney, Quentin Till, said she was prepared for the decision. He said he visited her in jail Wednesday night.

"I told her to be strong," Till said. "... I still see her being utilized and manipulated by Michael Jackson."

After the murders, the killers used the Sumners' bank cards to drain their accounts. Jacksonville homicide detectives, aided by federal marshals, used those transactions to trace Cole, Jackson and 20-year-old Alan Lyndell Wade to a motel in North Charleston, S.C., where they were arrested.

Weatherby also sentenced Jackson and Wade to die. A fourth defendant, 20-year-old Bruce Nixon, testified against the others and was sentenced to 55 years in prison for second-degree murder.

For the Sumners' family, the sentence ends years of coming to court and listening to the gruesome details of the murders. Revis Sumner, Reggie Sumner's brother, said Cole wrote to the family asking for forgiveness, and he said he has forgiven her.

That doesn't mean she shouldn't suffer for her actions, he and other relatives said.

"I pray for Tiffany. I pray for all of them," said the Rev. Jean Clark, Reggie Sumner's sister. "I'm grieved that these four young people have wasted their lives."