

## **Villages killer is youngest death-row inmate**

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Ocala -- A 20-year-old Marion County man convicted in the first-ever murder in The Villages became the youngest person on Florida's death row, a state corrections spokeswoman said Tuesday.

Renaldo McGirth was sentenced to death Monday by Marion Circuit Judge Brian Lambert, who called him the "primary actor" in the July 2006 shooting death of Diana Miller, 63, at her home in the affluent retirement community.

McGirth, who turned 20 on April 29, supplanted 21-year-old Jerone Hunter as the youngest person on the state's list of inmates sentenced to death, said Jo Ellyn Rackleff, a state corrections spokeswoman.

Hunter was ordered to die for his role in the August 2004 bludgeoning deaths of six people and a dog in Deltona.

Jurors who convicted McGirth of first-degree murder and other crimes had recommended death as his punishment by a vote of 11-1, a recommendation that the judge was required to give "great weight."

In a 30-page ruling, Lambert called the murder of Miller and the attempted murder of her husband, James, a crime "with no moral or legal justification."

James Miller, 71, was shot in the head at close range but survived.

Marion County sheriff's detectives said McGirth and two accomplices, Jarrord Roberts, 22, and Theodore Houston, 19, tried to rob the Millers at their home in The Villages of Springdale.

McGirth's defense lawyer, Candace Hawthorne, has called the verdict unfair and accused the Millers' 40-year-old daughter, Sheila Miller, of plotting the crime against her parents, retired corporate accountants.

Hawthorne pointed out that Sheila Miller would have inherited more than \$750,000 if both had died.

The daughter, who knew McGirth from past drug deals, was living temporarily with her parents while recovering from disabling injuries she had suffered in a drunken-driving accident.

Sheila Miller denied any role in the crimes and insisted she was forced to accompany the men to an ATM, a Kmart and a Gainesville mall. Jurors acquitted McGirth and Roberts of kidnapping.

Roberts, convicted of manslaughter and robbery with a firearm, was sentenced last month to life in prison. Houston is awaiting trial on first-degree murder, attempted first-degree murder and other charges.

State Attorney Brad King said he does not think an appeal of McGirth's death sentence would succeed if based on age.

"The law requires that an offender be at least 18 years old, and he was," King said.

Neither James Miller nor Sheila Miller attended the sentencing.

State records show McGirth is among the youngest defendants sentenced to die in Florida since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976.

Reputed vampire-cult leader Rod Ferrell, who also was defended by Hawthorne, was 17 in 1998 when sentenced to die for the murders of Richard and Ruth Wendorf of Eustis. Upon appeal, his sentence was commuted to life because of his age.

The state lists 386 inmates on death row, including John Couey, 49, convicted of sexual battery and first-degree murder of 9-year-old Jessica Lunsford, and Jason Wheeler, 32, convicted in the ambush and murder of Lake County Deputy Sheriff Wayne Koester.

Florida temporarily suspended executions after the botched lethal-injection killing of Angel Nieves Diaz in December 2006. The suspension is lifted, but no one has been put to death since then.

Caption: PHOTO: RENALDO McGIRTH: He was sentenced to death Monday for the July 2006 shooting death of Diana Miller.

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