

Man's death penalty trial begins in Jacksonville laundry operator's killing

Kevin Jerome Scott could face a death sentence if jurors convict him of first-degree murder, attempted armed robbery

- By Paul Pinkham

One minute, Xhulio Binjaku was a 14-year-old kid playing soccer behind his parents' Jacksonville coin laundry.

The next, he was a distraught crime victim, pleading frantically with a 911 operator as he watched his family's dream of a better life in America die with a robber's bullet.

Though he couldn't identify the gunman, Binjaku told a jury Tuesday about two suspicious men who circled the Southside laundry that night. As the teen's mother and sister sobbed on the front row, he testified the two men covered their faces with white T-shirts just before one shot his dad in the face.

The single gunshot in June 2007 killed Kristo Binjaku, 45, a former Albanian police officer who brought his family to Jacksonville in 2000.

"That's all it took for that man's dreams to vanish into thin air," Assistant State Attorney Bernie de la Rionda said. "He wanted a better life for himself and for his family. ... That dream came to an abrupt end because of the action of one man and his cohorts."

Three months after the shooting at Toledo Road and Powers Avenue, police arrested Kevin Jerome Scott, 24. They were led to him by Desi Eugene Bolling, 22, who admitted being the getaway driver and providing Scott with the murder weapon. Police recovered the gun from Bolling.

Scott could face a death sentence if jurors convict him this week of first-degree murder and attempted armed robbery. Bolling pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and is hoping for a lighter sentence in exchange for testifying against Scott. A third participant wasn't identified.

If Scott is found guilty, Circuit Judge Charles Arnold will reconvene jurors next week to hear evidence for and against the death penalty.

But Chief Assistant Public Defender Refik Eler told jurors the wrong man is on trial. Calling Bolling "an army of one," Eler said the former Army private is the real killer and at 6 feet more closely resembles one of the two tall robbers cited by witnesses. Scott stands 5 feet, 9 inches.

“The best witness in any case is an eyewitness, and no witness picked out Kevin Scott,” Eler said.

Xhulio Binjaku’s calm demeanor on the witness stand was a far cry from his tortured 911 calls, which were played for the jury. He testified he was playing soccer with a friend behind the store when he spotted the two men. At first he didn’t think anything about them.

“I thought it was just random people walking by,” he said.

But when the men returned, covered their faces and went into the laundry, the teen said he peeked inside in time to see the gunman leaning over his father. He said he didn’t hear a gunshot.

Other witnesses in the laundry told police the gunman came in demanding money, hit one man with his gun, shot Kristo Binjaku and left without taking anything. A second robber, known as Miami, stayed outside, de la Rionda said.

“There was really no reason for that shot,” de la Rionda said. “Maybe it was a language thing, who knows, but the victim didn’t give up the money fast enough.”

The prosecutor said Bolling wore a wire for police, and Scott told him during a recorded conversation at the jail that Binjaku was shot because he resisted.