

Jacksonville men sentenced to death, life in separate immigrant slayings

Victims came from Albania and Cuba seeking freedom and prosperity

By [Jim Schoettler](#)

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An emptiness could be felt in a Jacksonville courtroom Thursday after a man got life in the killing of a Cuban immigrant. None of the victim's family was on hand to watch the felon be led off.

The emptiness drifted down the hall 30 minutes later, this time crossing the faces of an Albanian immigrant's wife and children as they watched a judge sentence his killer to death.

"I know this doesn't bring you closure, but at least you know he got the ultimate penalty," prosecutor Bernie de la Rionda told the family of Kristo Binjaku.

Binjaku's wife, Shpresa, began weeping silently.

The victims are among at least 18 immigrants slain in Jacksonville in the past five years, most in robberies.

Jerry Alto Smith, 20, faced an automatic life sentence in the 2005 robbery and fatal shooting of Cuban immigrant Rolando Chang. Chang, 79, was attacked while smoking a cigar outside his home.

Smith was arrested in 2008 after DNA evidence taken from Chang's shorts linked him to the slaying. Smith told police he and another man were hunting for an elderly person to rob when they came upon Chang.

Jurors found Smith did not shoot Chang, but he was convicted of murder under a Florida law that holds a person accountable for being involved with another in a violent crime that ends in death. No other arrests were made.

Chang served nine years as a political prisoner under Cuban dictator Fidel Castro before escaping to the United States, where he cared for his disabled wife and son.

Despite pleas for mercy from Smith's family and a pastor, De la Rionda reminded Circuit Judge Mallory Cooper that Chang sought to live a peaceful life.

“The man came to this great country and ... he was killed by someone who wanted the money that he had,” said de la Rionda, himself a Cuban immigrant.

Later, Kevin Scott, 24, was sentenced to death in the slaying of Binjaku, 45. The married father of two was fatally shot during an attempted robbery at his Southside coin laundry.

Scott was convicted of first-degree murder, attempted armed robbery and aggravated battery in April and the jury later recommended the death sentence.

Circuit Judge Charles Arnold accepted the recommendation. The only emotion shown by Scott came when his shoulders tensed up as he was sentenced.

Binjaku, once an Albanian police officer, immigrated to Jacksonville in 2000 primarily to give his son and daughter a good education. He worked multiple jobs before opening the coin laundry, which he ran with his family.

In a recent Times-Union story about the immigrant homicides, Binjaku’s daughter, Malvina, spoke of the heartbreak her family has suffered since the slaying. The 19-year-old University of Florida sophomore said she also had no intentions of staying in Jacksonville because of the attack.

“I hate the city,” she said.

De la Rionda asked her Thursday to bury her hate. She flashed him an empty smile.