

Jury: Death for twin convicted of Eustis double murder

By Stephen Hudak | Sentinel Staff Writer
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TAVARES - A jury recommended death late this afternoon for Donte Hall, an Orlando identical twin convicted of a double murder in Eustis.

The six-man, six-woman jury deliberated about 90 minutes before issuing its advisory opinion to Circuit Judge T. Michael Johnson. Jurors voted 8-4 for death in one of the murders and a majority recommended life imprisonment in the other slaying.

Johnson, who must - by law - give "great weight" to the jury's recommendation, said he will review a trial transcript, written memorandums by the lawyers and hold a hearing later in July before deciding whether to impose a death sentence or life in prison.

Hall's father, James, upset by the jury's decision, said his son insists he was not involved. Hall's mother, Louise Laster, stood outside the courtroom with her son's 4-year-old boy.

"I just wish I could hug my son," she said.

Police said Hall, his twin brother Dante and two as-yet uncharged suspects plotted to crash and rob a party on Gottsche Avenue in Eustis where Donte Hall's girlfriend was performing as a stripper. Assistant State Attorney Bill Gross said Hall wielded and fired an assault rifle inside the home, killing Kison Evans, 32, and Anthony Bernard Blunt, 35.

Dante Hall is scheduled to be tried in August on identical charges.

Police say the Hall brothers crashed a party in masks, bandanas and guns, intending to rob guests watching three amateur strippers, including Donte Hall's girlfriend.

Earlier, Gross urged jurors to recommend death for Hall, saying he carried the biggest gun into the house and plotted the deadly scheme against innocent men he did not know and who posed no threat to him or his brother.

"It was his idea, his plan," the prosecutor said as Hall's mother, Louise Laster, fought back tears and shook her head in disagreement. "He was calling the shots. He was the ringleader. It was his choice. Now, the choice is yours."

Defense lawyer Frank Bankowitz told jurors they did not have to recommend death to punish Hall.

"He will never, ever get out of prison," Bankowitz. "He will die there."

A forensic psychologist who examined Hall in jail testified that Hall, a high school dropout, was borderline mentally retarded. Donte Hall likely has an IQ below 70, Eric Mings testified.

The psychologist's testimony was offered by the defense this morning in an attempt to persuade the jury that found Hall guilty of capital murder to recommend life over death as a sentence for him.

Gross let two of Anthony Blunt's 10 siblings paint a soft portrait for the jury of their youngest brother, one of two men shot to death at the house party on Gottsche Avenue in Eustis in September 2006.

Blunt, who worked for the state Department of Children & Families, was a big man with big shoulders and a big heart who loved food and his family, said his sister Eleanor Pursley, the wife of an Orlando police lieutenant.

"If we had a problem, he was there (to help) with a level head," she said.

Another sister, Juelene Blunt, told jurors that her church-going brother did not use drugs and speculated that he went to the after-hours party because the hosts had promised dancing girls and many of the other guests were lifelong pals of his.

"He did not pass judgment on the lifestyles of his friends," she said.

Eustis police said Donte Hall and the other armed, masked party-crashers burst through the door and opened fire when the guests were slow to respond to robbery demands.

Jurors decided Monday that Hall, acquitted of a street murder two years ago in Orange County, was one of the gunmen.