

Death sentence rattles convicted Turnpike slaying defendant's family

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WEST PALM BEACH- — It was one morning last month, as he was driving to work at Home Depot before dawn, that Lorenzo Troya finally screamed.

He was singing along to an oldies song on the radio when his voice got louder and louder and he realized he wasn't singing anymore.

"I just said 'Aaaaaaaah' " for about 15 to 20 seconds," Troya said, sitting in his mother's West Palm Beach house, holding his hands up on either side of his head as he did that morning.

For a few seconds he let go, released himself from the pain of knowing that his 25-year-old son Daniel Troya is headed to Death Row.

The issue of death - both the certain 2006 deaths of the Escobedo family on Florida's Turnpike and the possible death of their son convicted in their killing - looms over every aspect of the lives of the 46-year-old father, his wife, Maria, and the rest of Daniel Troya's family.

In their cars and at their jobs people sometimes find them staring blankly ahead, hearts wrung dry from trying to reconcile the grief they feel for the Escobedos' families with their serious doubts that their son was the one who murdered them and the fear that one day he may be executed anyhow.

"I can't even think about that. I'm not ready to deal with it," Maria Troya said of the possibility of a death sentence. "He's my son. He'll always be my son, no matter what."

The outside world doesn't always know how to deal with the Troyas.

In the days after March 31, when a federal jury handed down the death recommendation for Daniel Troya and Ricardo Sanchez, several of Maria Troya's co-workers at a Fort Pierce car dealership looked at her and at times seemed to want to approach her. But in most cases they walked away, she said, as if they didn't know what to say.

When Lorenzo Troya switched to a new bank a few weeks ago, the bank teller, whom he had seen around town for years and exchanged friendly hellos with, looked at his last name and wondered aloud in a cautious whisper: "Is that your brother on trial in the turnpike case?"

"That's my son," he answered plainly before asking. "Do you have any questions for me?"

He does the same with anyone who wants to talk to him about the case, always polite, always standing up for his son.

When the family gets together the conversation inevitably falls to Daniel - Danielito as his grandmother Maria calls him - and Lorenzo Troya is often the most vocal.

The father said he approached his son's trial ready to accept whatever punishment he received if prosecutors proved that he did it.

"For me, they didn't do that," he said. So he and the family mull the case, wondering why jurors didn't see things the way they and most people they talk to about the case did.

They spend hours talking about the mystery silver sedan that entered and exited the turnpike at the same time as the Escobedos' SUV and a van linked to Troya, Sanchez and Danny Varela, who prosecutors say was the head of a drug ring for which the other two men worked and Jose Luis Escobedo provided cocaine.

Prosecutors said the car wasn't linked to the killings, but for the Troyas it remains what they call one of several avenues for reasonable doubt.

They talk about the phone records from Daniel Troya's cellphone on the night Escobedo, his wife and two sons were killed, records jurors in the case said helped convince them he was involved.

"Phone calls don't kill!" Lorenzo repeats in every discussion.

They talk about their plans to fight his conviction even after his May 13 sentencing, letters to the Innocence Project, and an aunt in Chicago working to start a campaign on their son's behalf.

But they also talk about Luis Julian and Luis Damian Escobedo, who at 3 and 4 were not much older than Lorenzo and Maria's own grandchildren when they and their parents were shot to death. It was for the boys' deaths that jurors sentenced Daniel Troya to die.

So the family tries to reconcile the feelings, the grief and the doubt and the love. But they still never can.

"When the verdict came back, I felt like I was in a third-world country," Lorenzo Troya. "I said, 'If I was in another country and this happened I would understand.' ... Unless this happens to you, you'd never believe it could."