

John Couey, Jessica Lunsford's killer, dies in hospital

By [John Frank](#), Times Staff Writer
In Print: Thursday, October 1, 2009



The convicted sex offender who was sentenced to death for abducting Jessica Lunsford in the middle of the night and burying her alive in Citrus County died Wednesday, apparently from cancer.

Prison officials said John Couey, 51, died at Memorial Hospital in Jacksonville, but would not confirm the nature of his terminal illness, citing federal health privacy laws. He died at 11:15 a.m.

"It was expected," said Gretl Plessinger, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Corrections.

Prison officials transferred Couey from death row at Florida State Prison in Raiford to the hospital on Aug. 12. Authorities told the Lunsford family that Couey died from cancer, a condition previously unknown to his trial attorneys.

Couey looked older than his age suggested, a combination of a childhood marred by abuse and neglect and a drug-riddled life. His latest prison photo shows him with a shaved head, weighing a mere 123 pounds.

He died two years after a Citrus County judge gave him the death penalty, following the recommendation of a Miami jury, which voted 10-2 in favor of death by lethal injection.

In the emotional sentencing, the judge recounted how Jessica, a third-grader from Homosassa, disappeared from her room in the middle of the night in February 2005. Couey, a sex offender living across the street, kidnapped and raped her, then buried her alive in a plastic garbage bag outside his home.

"This was a determined, albeit savage, murder," Circuit Judge Ric Howard said at the August 2007 hearing. "She was alive when he put her in the hole. She was alive when he began to shovel the dirt over her body. Her last thoughts ... cannot be fathomed."

Jessica's disappearance sparked a nationwide search, and her death spurred the advocacy work of her father, Mark Lunsford, who lobbied dozens of states to pass laws strengthening the punishments and monitoring of sex offenders.

Assistant State Attorney Peter Magrino, one of the prosecutors who led the case, welcomed the news of Couey's death.

"The sooner the better," he said. "It matters not to me how he died, just that he's now dead and will never be able to victimize anyone else again."

For the Lunsford family, especially grandparents Ruth and Archie Lunsford, who owned the mobile home in Homosassa where Jessica slept the night of her abduction, Couey's death came as a relief. With the average stay on death row topping 12 years, they weren't certain they would see the case to its conclusion.

Judi McBride, the family's victim advocate, said she noticed a change in Ruth Lunsford's voice when they spoke Wednesday.

"It was a sound of peace and relief that I haven't heard from her before," McBride said. "I think Ruth and Archie have a sense of peace that they can go on with their lives and they know the end."

Citrus County Sheriff Jeff Dawsy said he wanted Couey to suffer "the way Jessie did when he killed her."

"I'm sorry I won't get to look him in the eyes as he died," he said in a statement.

Florida prison officials were still trying to contact Couey's relatives late Wednesday. He received no visitors while awaiting his execution, said Plessinger, the corrections spokeswoman.

In a conversation with his aunt before his sentencing, Couey said he expected to get the death penalty. He suggested his life was in God's hands when he said, "I don't let it bother me. ... You've got to go some way," and told his aunt he wanted to be cremated after his execution.

If his body is not claimed, Couey will be buried in the inmate cemetery outside Union Correctional Institution in Raiford.

The Florida Supreme Court was scheduled to hear the automatic appeal of his death sentence on Nov. 3. No date had been set for Couey's execution.

John Frank can be reached at jfrank@sptimes.com or (352) 754-6114.