

Judge commits George Edenfield to mental hospital in Barrios slaying

Doctors have 90 days to further evaluate his mental ability; if his status changes, he could still face trial in boy's killing.

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TERRY DICKSON/The Times-Union

George Edenfield (right) and his defense lawyer Charles Nester listen as evidence of his mental incompetency is entered into the record during a hearing Tuesday before Glynn County Superior Court Judge Stephen Scarlett.

By [Teresa Stepzinski](#)

BRUNSWICK - Convicted child molester George Edenfield won't stand trial anytime soon in the sexual abuse slaying of 6-year-old Christopher Michael Barrios Jr. nearly four years ago.

Superior Court Judge Stephen Scarlett ruled Edenfield was mentally incompetent Tuesday and ordered him committed to a state mental hospital for further evaluation at the behest of prosecutors and defense lawyers.

The lawyers cited recent evaluations by state and defense psychologists, who agreed that Edenfield has a diminished mental capacity and is unable to assist in his own defense.

They also gave Scarlett copies of six reports beginning in 1980 from Glynn County school system and social service agency psychologists who classified Edenfield as mentally retarded. Edenfield graduated high school with a special education diploma.

"Both the defense and the state agree the defendant, George Edenfield, is incompetent to stand trial at this time," Scarlett said.

Scarlett ordered Edenfield transferred immediately to a Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities institution, where he will undergo an extensive examination by psychologists and other mental health experts. He will be examined at Georgia Regional Hospital in Savannah.

"They are to conduct an evaluation in 90 days of the defendant's mental capabilities and issue a prognosis as to whether there is a substantial probability that he will become competent to stand trial," Scarlett said.

Scarlett's rulings follow Georgia law which mandates the legal procedures when the mental competency of a defendant is at issue.

Edenfield, a blank expression on his face, sat hunched forward with his hands clasped in his lap in a chair between his lawyers, Gerald Word and Charles Nester, as his future for the next few months was set. He said nothing.

Prosecutors previously conceded Edenfield has a diminished mental capacity but insist he is competent. They agree with the defense that Edenfield needs an in-depth evaluation.

That is the beginning, however, not the end of the issue, Acting District Attorney David Perry told the Times-Union.

"I honestly believe he is competent now," Perry said. "The problem is, the first doctor who examined him in jail says that he is not competent."

Edenfield's lawyers, however, maintain he is incompetent, incapable of understanding the seriousness or consequences of his actions and has an IQ well below normal.

"My personal belief is he's not likely to be restored to competency," Word said.

The evaluation is not legally binding on prosecutors or the defense. Because it's an opinion, either side could reject it and state law allows a jury trial to determine his competency.

If he's ever tried, Edenfield faces the death penalty if convicted of murdering the kindergartner.

Word doubts his client understood Tuesday's hearing or its implications.

"He knows he's going to a hospital. We explained that to him, but I'm not sure he really understands what that means," Word said. "I'm not sure this won't be a lifetime [process] for him."

'You never get over it'

Christopher's grandmother, Sue Rodriguez, left the courthouse disgusted after the hearing.

"He ain't crazy ... He's smart as a darned whip. He's got them all fooled. He's putting on a good show," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez said three years and five months have passed since Christopher was abducted, molested and killed.

"As time goes on, you learn to live with it but you never get over it," she said.

Not a day goes by when their family does not remember his loving nature, his gap-toothed grin, she said. Not one day goes by when they don't grieve for the unfulfilled promise of the man Christopher might have become, she said as tears welled up in her eyes.

"You think of Christopher as a baby trying to talk and laughing ... You miss him coming home from school, bringing you his pictures that he made. That's important to a grandmother," she said.

It took mere minutes to end her grandson's life, but more than three years later, only one of the three family members charged with his slaying has been tried, convicted and sentenced to die, Rodriguez said.

"It's too long. Too, too long ... Christopher might have been a doctor or a lawyer and had a family of his own by the time they get done dragging this all out," Rodriguez said.

Christopher's father, Mike Barrios, did not attend the hearing. He has buried himself in his work and keeps his grief bottled up, his mother said.

"Mike goes by his grave and just sits there by himself. He doesn't talk about it a lot. The mention of Christopher, you can tell it upsets him," Rodriguez said.

Parents blame their son

The night Christopher disappeared, George Edenfield told Glynn County police he killed Christopher because the devil told him to do it, investigators testified during his father David Edenfield's trial last year. He later recanted.

Edenfield's parents told police their son knows right from wrong although he is mentally retarded and unable to care for himself. Both also blamed him for the slaying.

Christopher disappeared while playing outside at Canal Mobile Home Park on March 8, 2007. Police recovered his body one week later stuffed inside black plastic garbage bags and dumped in woods about two miles from the park.

Edenfield and his parents, David and Peggy, were neighbors of the kindergartner. All three were charged with his killing.

In October, a jury found David Edenfield guilty of murdering and molesting Christopher and imposed the death penalty.

In a recorded confession played for jurors, David Edenfield said he and his son sodomized then choked the boy to death. George Edenfield had brought Christopher into their home under the pretext of playing video games, Peggy Edenfield testified during her husband's trial.

After their arrests, George Edenfield and his mother talked about what they had told police and what each would say in the future, police clandestinely made video recordings show. He also explained bail procedures to his mother, who, unlike him had never been arrested before, the videos showed.

Her son, however, is a registered sex offender. George Edenfield was convicted in 1997 of two counts of child molestation following incidents involving young boys in downtown Brunswick.

David Edenfield, 61, is appealing his conviction and death sentence.

No trial date has been set for Peggy Edenfield, 58. She will not face the death penalty because she testified against her husband, and agreed to testify against her son.

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