

Gonzalez blames sheriff, media for conviction

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With his life on the line, Leonard Patrick Gonzalez Jr. blamed the media, the sheriff and a politically motivated prosecutor for his double murder conviction.

The 36-year-old man found guilty of the July 9, 2009, murders of Byrd and Melanie Billings testified for about 30 minutes at a sentencing hearing on Wednesday.

Gonzalez winked and smiled at his wife, Tabatha, as he passed her seat. Unlike the trial in October where he was allowed to wear a suit and tie, he wore a lime green jumpsuit, which is the calling card of high-risk inmates at Escambia County Jail.

Circuit Judge Nick Geeker will decide Feb. 17 if he will follow the jury's recommendation to put Gonzalez to death after it convicted him of two counts of first-degree murder and one count of home invasion.

Gonzalez said Escambia County Sheriff David Morgan and State Attorney Bill Eddins used the high-profile murders to advance their political careers. He called his experience a "fast-food style of justice."

"They spoon-fed the public claims of evidence that never materialized," he said.

Gonzalez also insisted the prosecution had no credible evidence proving he was the shooter of the Beulah couple.

He pointed the finger at Hugh Wiggins, a Gulf Breeze man indicted with his wife, Pamela Long Wiggins, for trying to dispose of weapons used in the home invasion and murders of the Billingses.

"The person who killed those people was a monster," he said.

Gonzalez spoke kindly of the couple he's convicted of killing. He often addressed Ashley Markham and her husband Blue, who were seated in the gallery. The couple now cares for the Billingses' nine adopted special-needs children.

"I am sorry for what everyone's had to go through in this," he said. "The Billings family, I know you guys are left with a lot of questions, but I know you also know who did this."

Gonzalez also used the platform Thursday to criticize the sheriff's saturation of national and international airwaves — including an appearance on The Oprah Winfrey Show — in the wake of the murders, saying it made it impossible for him to have a fair trial.

"As David Morgan said, 'a real humdinger,' " Gonzalez said, referring to the sheriff's description of the home invasion turned double murder. "As politicians, I believe it became impossible for Mr. Morgan and Mr. Eddins to protect my rights."

Eddins questioned Gonzalez at length about his often rambling claims that he was set up, that cooperating witnesses lied to protect themselves and that the jury convicted an innocent man. At times, Gonzalez lobbed questions at Eddins and criticized his and Assistant State Attorney John Molchan's prosecution of the case.

"You all just have to put it on somebody. You're not going to be the state attorney who turns around and says, 'We got the wrong guy. Elect me again,' " Gonzalez said. "You're so off on this, and you know it, Bill."

Eddins calmly continued with his questions. Eddins said after the hearing that he was confident that they got the right guy.

"We feel the testimony of the defendant today was not credible and was contradicted by solid, overwhelming evidence in the jury trial itself," Eddins said.

Gonzalez Jr. hissed a protest at the presence of the media in the courtroom to his attorneys Randy Etheridge and John Jay Gontarek.

He said he didn't want a psychological evaluation read for the attendees and the media to hear.

"I'm not crazy," he said.

Tabatha Gonzalez addressed the court and called her husband a good father — they have seven children between them — and said that he instilled values and a sense of respect, something he never experienced from his father, who is a co-defendant in the case.

"I truly believed they would turn around and say they made a mistake," she said. "It's OK to say that you made a mistake. I love my husband very much, and I wish people would say that they made a mistake."

Linda Clark Gray said her nephew was estranged from his father, Leonard Patrick Gonzalez Sr., for most of his life. She said his father was a drunk and a drug addict and once broke his wife's wrist when he hurled an ashtray at her in a rage.

Despite this, she said her sister raised Gonzalez Jr. to be an upstanding man with respect for and a need to protect women and children.

"My nephew grew up to be a great person. He grew up wanting to protect mommies," she said, referring to a nonprofit organization Gonzalez Jr. and his wife ran that trained women and children in self-defense.