

Jury recommends death to ringleader of 'ninja' robbers

By the CNN Wire Staff

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Jury recommends death for 'Ninja' killer

Pensacola, Florida (CNN) -- A jury has recommended that a Florida man be sentenced to death, a day after he was convicted of first-degree murder for leading a crew of masked men dressed as ninjas to ambush a Florida home.

Ten members of the 12-person Escambia County jury voted to recommend the death penalty for Leonard Patrick Gonzalez Jr., with two dissenting.

On Thursday night, the same jury found Gonzalez guilty on two counts of murder for the execution-style murder of Byrd and Melanie Billings. He was also found guilty of armed home-invasion robbery.

The penalty phase began Friday morning, with the jury delivering the sentence -- after about an hour and ten minutes of deliberation -- just before 2 p.m. (3 p.m. ET).

A formal sentencing hearing for Gonzalez is scheduled for December 9. Until then, he will remain behind bars.

During the trial, the 35-year-old Gonzalez frequently conversed with his attorneys, shook his head and smirked. He told Judge Nickolas Geeker that he didn't need to call any witnesses or testify on his own behalf because "the evidence speaks for itself."

And after the jury came out to ask a question during its four hours of deliberations, he said, "I've already been tried and convicted by the media."

But Gonzalez was stoic just before both the recommended sentence and verdict came in. During the latter, he bowed his head after the clerk announced he was guilty of each murder count and appeared to wipe his eyes while the jury was being polled.

Meanwhile, the Billings family cried in the courtroom, with Byrd's and Melanie's daughter Ashley Markham hugging prosecutors. Gonzalez nodded to the Billings family -- as he'd done earlier Thursday -- after he was fingerprinted and led away.

The jury of 11 women and one man deliberated for four hours before reaching the verdict. In that time, they requested to see a 14-minute surveillance video, culled from 16 cameras around the Billings house that were set up around the house to watch the nine special-needs children that the couple had adopted and were in the house at the time of the murder.

One video showed a masked man -- whom Frederick Thornton, a member of the group, identified as Gonzalez -- shooting Byrd Billings once in each leg. Another video showed a scene from a girl's bedroom as a red van packed with people arrives outside the house. The girl gets up from bed as the masked men enter the house, then hides under the covers pretending to sleep after hearing the commotion nearby. The van was owned by Gonzalez.

A camera was not in the master bedroom. But Thornton said that Gonzalez led the Billings' couple into the room. And expert witnesses showed how Gonzalez shot Byrd Billings once in the head and twice more as he lay face down on the floor, and then shot Melanie Billings through the head and chest.

During closing arguments, Assistant State Attorney John Molchan painted an involved picture depicting Gonzalez as the ringleader who hatched the plan, formed the team, outfitted six other men with guns and clothes, then led them as they barged into the Billings' large home in Beulah, Florida.

In Session's Jean Casarez and Nancy Leung contributed to this report.