

Fla. jury recommends death sentence for ringleader of deadly ninja attack on wealthy couple

MELISSA NELSON Associated Press

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PENSACOLA, Fla. (AP) — A former karate instructor should be put to death for leading a group of men dressed like ninjas to rob and kill a wealthy Florida couple while their nine special-needs children slept or cowered nearby, a jury recommended Friday.

The jurors voted 10-2 to recommend that Patrick Gonzalez Jr. be executed for the slayings of Byrd and Melanie Billings. Their nine adopted children, who are between the ages of 5 and 12, all have special needs including fetal alcohol syndrome and autism.

Some of the couple's relatives appeared happy, though others showed no emotion when the recommendation was announced. Gonzalez had no reaction.

"The justice system has worked," Ashley Markham, the couple's adult daughter, said in a statement she read to the media. Markham is now raising the couple's other children.

Under Florida law, the final sentence will be imposed by Judge Nickolas Geeker, who must give the recommendation "great weight." Geeker will hear from attorneys again at a Dec. 9 hearing, though it could take up to three months for him to issue a final decision.

John Jan Gontarek, Gonzalez's defense attorney, said he was disappointed but hoped Geeker would not follow the jury's recommendation.

Earlier in the day, State Attorney Bill Eddins told jurors that Gonzalez continued to torment Melanie Billings after shooting her husband in each leg and in the head.

"He let her stand there and watch him shoot her husband down like a dog," Eddins said. "That is obviously cruel and unusual punishment."

He suggested that Melanie Billings' last thoughts before she died must have been whether the men would turn their guns on the children. The children were not hurt.

The jury of 11 women and one man convicted Gonzalez of two counts of first-degree murder and one count of home-invasion robbery late Thursday after half a day of deliberations. The jurors began considering their sentencing recommendation on Friday.

Gonzalez appeared in court in handcuffs, watched by six uniformed and armed deputies.

He had been subdued throughout much of the trial but became agitated during closing statements. He twisted in his chair, pointed at his attorney with his cuffed hands and was animated while whispering to another attorney.

After jurors left the courtroom and Gonzalez was being led away in handcuffs, he pointed his fingers at two photographers — one for True TV and another for the Pensacola News Journal.

"I cannot wait to say goodbye to you and to you," he said, according to the photographers.

Earlier Friday, Gonzalez told Geeker that he did not want his wife and mother to testify on his behalf. After conferring with his attorneys, he reluctantly changed his mind.

Gonzalez said he had been tried and convicted by the press and didn't want his relatives subjected to media scrutiny. Gonzalez asked that his family be allowed to testify without the media present, but Geeker denied the request, saying the trial was open to the public.

Pointing at Gonzalez, defense attorney Randall Etheridge asked jurors to spare his client's life. He said Gonzalez had done good things in the past, including teaching karate to young children and being a good father.

"A vote for life doesn't diminish his responsibility for what he did," Etheridge said.

He handed jurors a photograph of Gonzalez, his wife and their six children and then told the jurors that any one of them could make the difference between life and death for his client.

Gonzalez's mother, Terry Poff, asked jurors to "look into their hearts" when deciding their recommendation.

Poff said that her son was diagnosed at a young age with a behavior disorder but that he excelled at karate and quickly became a black belt. She said he struggled with a prescription painkiller [addiction](#) in later years.

His wife, Tabitha Gonzalez, testified that his addiction to drugs and alcohol changed his personality.