

Death for drifter convicted in Fla. forest slaying

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — A drifter who prosecutors have said abducted two women and then waited hours or even days to kill and behead them in remote forests was sentenced to death on Thursday.

The judge took less than 15 minutes to announce his decision.

Gary Michael Hilton, in a blue jail uniform, showed no emotion as the judge imposed the sentence. Deputies then walked Hilton over to a side table to fingerprint him.

The 64-year-old was convicted in February of the 2007 death of Cheryl Dunlap of Crawfordville, Fla. The beheaded body of Dunlap — a 46-year-old nurse and Sunday school teacher — was found in north Florida's Apalachicola National Forest.

In a sense, the death penalty was a foregone conclusion. A jury had unanimously recommended a death sentence in Dunlap's killing, and Florida judges must give "great weight" to a jury's sentencing recommendation. And judges usually follow that recommendation in capital cases.

"May God have mercy on your soul," Circuit Judge James C. Hankinson told Hilton before leaving the courtroom.

Hilton already had been sentenced to life in prison in Georgia after pleading guilty to killing 24-year-old hiker Meredith Emerson of Buford, Ga. The headless bodies of both women were found in wooded areas where Hilton had camped in Georgia and Florida.

Hilton was arrested at a north Georgia convenience store where he had tried to get rid of Dunlap's boots. He still is a suspect in three other killings in Florida and North Carolina.

Assistant Public Defender Robert Friedman, Hilton's lawyer, said he would appeal the sentence. The Florida Supreme Court automatically reviews death sentence appeals.

Friedman said he will challenge, among other things, the fact the judge allowed some jurors to sit on the case even though they said they knew about Emerson's murder.

State Attorney Willie Meggs, who prosecuted Hilton, shrugged off questions about spending money to prosecute the case when Hilton already had pleaded guilty to killing Emerson.

"It takes someone smarter than me to put a dollar value on someone's life," he said.

According to reports, Hilton also is suspected in the disappearance of John and Irene Bryant, who vanished while hiking in North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest in October 2007, and in the death of 27-year-old Michael Scot Louis, who vanished one month later in Tomoka State Park in Ormond Beach, Fla.

Louis also was found decapitated. Hilton has not been charged in those cases.

Gloria Tucker, a cousin of Dunlap's who attended Thursday's sentencing, called Hilton a "monster."

"There's never justice for victims; nothing will ever bring them back," she said. "But he'll never be able to hurt another person."

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