

Jury recommends death for Gregory

By FRANK FERNANDEZ, Staff writer
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DAYTONA BEACH -- William Gregory sat still in a courtroom Wednesday as he heard the jury's first recommendation: that he be put to death for the shotgun slaying of his ex-girlfriend.

Then the jury recommended Gregory be put to death for also fatally shooting his ex-girlfriend's boyfriend.

Gregory lowered his head and looked at the table before him.

The jury recommended by two separate votes of 7 to 5 that Gregory be executed for taking a 12-gauge shotgun and shooting his ex-girlfriend Skyler Meekins, 17, and her boyfriend, Daniel Dyer, 22, as they slept together. Gregory shot each one in the head with a shotgun slug on Aug. 21, 2007, in Meekins' grandparents' house near Flagler Beach.

Meekins' and Dyer's last night alive was also the first they were spending alone together.

Gregory slipped into the house, took a semi-automatic shotgun from a hall closet and loaded it with a couple of slugs and shot the couple shortly after 1 a.m. The shotgun -- with Gregory's fingerprints -- was left near the bodies. Meekins and Gregory's daughter, Kyla, who is now 4, was sleeping in another part of the house.

Some of Meekins' and Dyer's family and friends wept as the jury's recommendations were announced. Dyer's sister clapped once before catching herself. Outside the courtroom they embraced and dabbed at teary eyes.

Circuit Judge William A. Parsons is not bound by the jury's death recommendations, but must give it great weight. Gregory, 28, will get one last chance to plead for his life at a hearing April 1 when the defense will again argue against the death penalty. Parsons won't immediately sentence Gregory, who is being held in the Flagler County Inmate Facility, but will likely set a date for sentencing.

Gregory fell one vote shy of a 6 to 6 tie for each of the death recommendations, which would have resulted in a life recommendation from the jury of 10 women and two men. While Gregory's family has been present at various times during the trial, none were in the courtroom at the S. James Foxman Justice Center for the death recommendations. A woman who said she was a friend of Gregory's cried. She declined comment.

Charles "Hap" Meekins, whose daughter was slain by Gregory, also cried but for different reasons.

"I really had no preference one way or the other," Meekins said. "The verdict last week was what I was looking for. And this is what it is. And I'm happy with it."

Dyer's sister, Jennifer Dyer-Auriemma, said that on behalf of her entire family she wanted to thank the jurors.

"We know it wasn't easy for them and we are just glad that justice is served," Dyer-Auriemma said. "And this was the best outcome and we are happy. Just thank you to the jury. It meant a lot that they sat through all that and were able to have enough compassion for Dan and Skyler to recommend death on someone else. That's a hard thing to do."

Prosecutor Jacquelyn Roys argued Gregory deserved the death penalty. Roys said there were four statutory aggravators that called for capital punishment: Gregory was on felony probation when he killed Meekins and Dyer; Gregory killed more than one person; and the killings were done during a burglary. The same jury that convicted Gregory of the two counts of first-degree murder last week also convicted him of burglary because he sneaked into Meekins' home. Another aggravator was the killings were "cold, calculated and premeditated," Roys said.

Roys reminded jurors of testimony that months before the murders Gregory had threatened to kill Skyler Meekins and any man she was with.

"William Gregory had a plan," Roys said. "He had a plan long before Daniel Dyer came in the picture. William Gregory said if Skyler ever left me I'm going to blow her head off. If she's cheating on me, I'm going to blow her head off. "

Gregory realized Skyler Meekins had fallen for Dyer and carried out his plan, Roys said. Gregory had lived with Skyler Meekins at her grandparents' home for nearly a year after Kyla was born. Gregory was aware the shotgun was kept in a hall closet along with ammunition.

"William Gregory knew that that gun was there," Roys said. "William Gregory knew when and if the occasion came that he had to blow off Skyler's head and whatever guy she was with, he knew where that weapon was. That's pre-planning."

The killings were cold, calculated and premeditated, Roys said.

"He goes into the closet, " Roys said. "He gets the shotgun. He reaches up and grabs the ammunition. Do you not know by the evidence that he intended to kill both of them when he grabbed two bullets to put in that shotgun. He loaded one before he loaded the other. He walked across the house, bypassing everybody else in that house, every other room. He walked directly into Skyler Meekins' room where her and Dan were sleeping. There was no provocation. There was no scuffle. There was no argument. There were two people soundly sleeping not knowing that Billie Gregory came over to kill them."

Gregory's defense attorney Garry Wood argued Meekins had not even invited Daniel Dyer over until 10 p.m. on Aug. 20, so there was no evidence of premeditation. Wood said Gregory had been doing drugs the day before the killings and had not talked of hurting or harming anyone.

Wood called Gregory's mother, Lynda Probert, who testified Gregory had fathered another daughter while living in Montana about 10 years ago. Probert said the girl and her mother now live in California but Gregory has not been in contact.

Probert said Gregory had suffered two head injuries while growing up, one when he was just 17 days old. She said Gregory's father, Ray Gregory, had not been part of his son's life and had not given her child support. She said it was only a year ago that Ray Gregory made contact with the family. Probert said Gregory had a stepfather who drank too much and later she had a boyfriend that also drank too much.

Probert said the family had lived in Green Cove Springs, then briefly Las Vegas and then moved to Montana, where Gregory grew up, before ending up in Flagler Beach.

Roys pointed out during cross-examination that Gregory had had a caring grandfather and grandmother while he lived in Montana. Roys got Probert to agree Gregory had had birthday parties, built forts, climbed playhouses, attended school, had a mom who worked, had brothers and sisters, and had friends whom he played with.

Roys said Gregory went camping, fishing and hunting while in Montana.

Wood told the jurors that recommending Gregory be sentenced to life in prison without parole was punishment enough.

"To put it bluntly, what we are talking about is how he's going to die as punishment for these two charges," Wood said. "Is he going to be put to death or is he going to spend the rest of his life and die in prison?"

Wood pointed out that a clock in the courtroom said it was 1:45 p.m.

"It's punishment every day," Wood said. "He's sitting in prison today. Tomorrow at 1:45 p.m. is going to be exactly the same for him. He's going to be sitting in a small cell in a prison. His rights all restricted, can't go anywhere except where the prison tells him to every day for the rest of his life."

The jury's recommendation was vindication for Cori Aldrich, 21, who was Skyler Meekins' best friend.

"I'm happy either way," she said. "But I'm definitely happy with what happened. That's what we wanted and that's what we've been waiting for."

Skyler Meekins' aunt, Debi Meekins Martinez, said she was pleased by the recommendation.

"We're thrilled that justice is served," she said. "It's not going to bring back Skyler or Dan but at least this phase is over. "

Skyler Meekins' brother, Colton Meekins, 20, said justice was served.

"It's not in my hands to decide it," he said. "I'm not going to say I'm not happy with it. We'll see what the judge ultimately does. I love my sister and you can't just go kill people. It's inexcusable."