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Teen sentenced to life in prison for murders

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VANDALIA — A Loogootee teen was sentenced to life in prison Friday for murders he committed more than a year ago after he apologized in court to the victims' families.

"I'm sorry for everything that's happened, and everyone that's been hurt," said 16-year-old Clifford Baker in Fayette County Circuit Court Friday. "I'm sorry to the family."

Baker, who was convicted last month of shooting and killing Mike Mahon and Debra Tish, as well as invading their homes and the homes of neighbors Steve and Randy Krajefski, was sentenced to natural life without parole for the murders, and 30 years plus three years of mandatory supervision upon release for the home invasion counts.

Baker's attorneys pleaded for a more than 50-year sentence that would have barred Baker's release until he was in his 60s. "It would deprive him of his liberty until he is an old and frail man," said Baker attorney Mark Wykoff.

Throughout the sentencing hearing, Baker's educators and family testified to his personality and upbringing. They painted a picture of a boy who was obedient in the classroom, but not so much outside of it, never in legal trouble, and a boy who was raised by an alcoholic and, at times, abusive father.

"He was always polite in the classroom, always behaved," said South Central Middle School teacher Cindy Garrett.

However, she also said Baker had gotten into fights outside the classroom, and Principal Greg Grinestaff testified he had been suspended for physical violence.

Fayette County State's Attorney Friedel noted it was that behavior that landed Baker in a SAFE school for behavioral disorders. Baker's family recalled a mostly behaved boy who was plagued by his father's alcoholism — an affliction his father himself admitted to while on the stand. Baker attorney Monroe McWard asked Baker's father, Jeff Goldman, if he was always kind of hard on him discipline-wise, which family members said was more severe when Goldman drank.

"Yes. I didn't want him to be like me," answered Goldman.

Justina Jones, whose last name was Fryman when the murders occurred, said he got along fine with her two children when she and Goldman lived together and was mostly quiet.

Goldman's cousin Nelda Siebert said she also felt her 13-year-old son was safe around Baker, who spent time at Siebert's residence a week before the murders.

"I trusted my son's life with him. They went swimming, bike riding. They did everything together," she said.

McWard noted Baker's troubled past also was plagued by his limited relationship with his mother, Tequila Baker, who testified Friday she lost custody of him when he was 1 year old.

Tequila Baker said her contact with him lessened when she moved to Indiana and lost her driver's license.

"I tried to make it over here, but when I did, his dad wouldn't let me see him," she said, adding she tried to get enforceable visitation but was unsuccessful.

Tequila Baker had made contact again with her son when he was 13 and maintained a distant relationship with him through Facebook and phone calls.

"I didn't want to push it," she said of their relationship.

Baker's father said during the hearing it's probably his fault that led to Baker's circumstances and didn't want see him sentenced to prison for life.

"I would like to see my boy at my house before I die. He is a good boy. I love you," Goldman said as he wiped away tears.

Jones also lamented the events of Aug. 4, 2010, when the murders occurred.

"I wish I could go back. Not only two lives were taken, but another one as well. I'm so sorry to everyone. This is like a dream a person can't wake up from," said a tearful Jones, who physically broke down after her testimony and was helped from the courtroom. Robert Goldman, Jeff's brother, who was tearful as well blamed the antidepressant Cymbalta.

"I know if it wouldn't have been for those pills he wouldn't have done it," he said, adding he regretted not saying something to his brother about Baker's dislike for the drug, but didn't to avoid confrontation with Jeff Goldman. "If I stepped in this never would have happened."

The apologies seem to have little affect on Mahon and Tish's families as they read statements prior to sentencing.

"They were two of the greatest people on the face of the Earth that were taken in the most brutal way," said the couple's niece LaTisha Paslay.

Paslay, who said after the hearing justice had been served with the life sentence, talked of Tish's love for her family and nieces and nephews, especially not having any children of her own.

"She was there for every milestone. She was there after I gave birth and taught me to drive for the first time," she recalled. "Mike taught me how to ride a jet ski for the first time and my son how to fish. You'll never know the number of times since Aug. 4 I've dialed her. I still have their phone numbers."

Paslay said Baker's family should be held accountable also for Baker's actions and "allowed him to become the person that murdered Deb and Mike."

"I'm angry we have a life without them," she said. "We couldn't even have an open casket. I'm angry we have to explain to our children what happened. I hope every time the defendant closes his eyes he sees what he did to them until the day he dies."

Patty Martin, Tish's sister, said her family now lives in fear since the murders.

"We cannot live a happy prosperous life," she said. "No matter how long it takes. It's the family's duty to make sure justice is fully served."

Friedel said Baker was a danger to everyone in the community, and believes if the Krajefskas had been asleep four homicides would have been committed.

Friedel said lack of supervision contributed to Baker's actions, but he chose his actions.

"I appreciate Jeff would like to see his son out of prison before he dies, but I appreciate Deb and Mike's family would like to see them one more time."

Wykoff empathized with Mahon and Tish's families.

"I know these folks hurt and they should," he said, admitting he's also thought about the pain the families are experiencing and that it pales in comparison to that of Baker's family. But in arguing for a lesser sentence, he believed Baker could one day contribute to society. He noted Baker has received all As and one B since his incarceration and believes he can continue to prosper in a structured environment like prison.

“It would allow him to be transformed and become a productive member of society.”

Still, Judge Michael McHaney cited case law and believed he had no discretion in sentencing and was bound by law to give the sentence he did, according to the penal code. He also denied the defense’s motion to have the guilty verdict vacated or a new trial ordered.

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