

Metro

DEATH SENTENCE GIVEN TO KILLER OF KENTUCKY GIRL JUDGE REJECTS PLEA FOR LIFE IN PRISON

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662 words

5 September 1998

The Evansville Courier

EVVL

Final

A4

English

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Robert Keith Woodall will become the 35th person on death row at the Kentucky State Penitentiary at Eddyville.

Woodall, 24, of Greenville, Ky., was sentenced Friday afternoon to die for the Jan. 25, 1997, murder of 16-year-old Sarah Hansen of Greenville. He was also given two life sentences by Caldwell Circuit Judge Bill Cunningham for the abduction and rape of the popular Muhlenberg South High School student.

Public defender Jill Giordana, one of two lawyers to represent Woodall at the July sentencing hearing, in a final statement Friday urged Cunningham to sentence Woodall to life in prison without parole, citing a mental illness and neglectful treatment by family members when he was a child.

"I'm just asking the court to look at Keith's entire life," she said. "The loss of his life will not bring (Ms. Hansen) back."

But Muhlenberg Commonwealth's Attorney Ralph Vick told the judge, "If these acts do not justify the death penalty, I can think of no act that would justify it."

Woodall's was the first death penalty verdict returned by a Caldwell County jury in about 30 years.

Cunningham said jurors had recommended the death penalty in this case because of the brutality of the crime and the lack of an expression of remorse by Woodall.

Woodall, who had remained silent throughout his many appearances

in court, also declined an opportunity to make a statement at Friday's sentencing.

Cunningham, who won two death penalty convictions as a prosecutor, said this was his first time to have to pronounce a death sentence as a judge.

"But basically, I don't think the facts in this case or the defendant gave either me or the jury much choice," he said afterward.

Ms. Hansen, a high-school cheerleader and band member, was abducted early on a Saturday evening from the parking lot of a Greenville convenience store where she had gone to rent a movie.

When she did not return home, her family notified police. Officers found the van at a lake at the edge of town.

Ms. Hansen's body was found floating in the icy water. Her throat had been slashed, but an autopsy showed she had drowned.

Woodall, who lived about a mile from the lake, was arrested three days later. Shoes he wore matched a bloody imprint found at the scene, and a bundle of wet, blood-stained clothing was found in his apartment.

Woodall's case was transferred from Muhlenberg County to Caldwell County because of publicity about the crime.

He unexpectedly pleaded guilty to charges in April, just as he was about to go on trial, and asked a jury to set his sentence. In July, a Caldwell County jury heard several days of testimony and said he should die for the murder.

Woodall is only the second person in Kentucky to be sentenced to die by lethal injection since state lawmakers approved that method of execution earlier this year.

A Fayette County man sentenced to death for his role in a murder-for-hire scheme was the first, said Barry Banister, a prison representative.

Previously, people sentenced to death in Kentucky were electrocuted.

Harold McQueen of Richmond, Ky., convicted of the 1980 murder of a Richmond convenience store clerk, died in the electric chair on July 1, 1997. His was the first execution in Kentucky since that of Kelly Moss of Henderson, Ky., in 1962.

Woodall's conviction and sentence now gets an automatic review by

the Kentucky Supreme Court, in addition to whatever appeals may be filed by his state-appointed attorneys.

The review by the state's high court can take two to three years, Cunningham said. Appeals also routinely stall executions for up to a decade.

Photos, 2;

Caption: Sarah Hansen Robert Woodall

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