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HOLLIS GETS LIFE SENTENCE

JOHN ALLARD, Staff Writer

A Lexington County jury spared the life of Brett Hollis late Saturday, sentencing him to life in prison without the possibility of parole for killing his ex-girlfriend's mother and new boyfriend in a jealous rage.

Jurors deliberated about 40 minutes before deciding Hollis, 20, should be kept in prison for the rest of his life, rather than be executed. They heard testimony from 75 witnesses and reviewed more than 200 pieces of evidence. This was only the third time in the last two decades that a Lexington County jury handed down a life sentence in the more than 30 cases where 11th Circuit Solicitor Donnie Myers sought the death penalty.

Myers said he thought the fact that Hollis was only 17 when he committed the murders persuaded jurors to show him mercy.

"Age was a big thing," Myers said. "I wasn't surprised with the verdict, given how quickly they came back."

Hollis smiled and held hands with **Jack Swerling**, one of his court-appointed attorneys. He later bit his lip and fought back tears while waiting for Circuit Judge James Johnson to formally sentence him.

He later held up his right thumb and looked at his parents while sheriff's deputies led him from the courtroom. Hollis' mother, Blair, hugged **Swerling**. She and her husband, Richard "Dickie" Hollis, had bowed their heads in prayer while a clerk read the verdict.

"I had my faith in God and a lot of prayers," Blair Hollis said. "We're just thankful. He's a good kid."

Dickie Hollis said he and his wife regret the killings committed by the youngest of their three sons.

"We'll be praying for the other families," Dickie Hollis said. "Sometimes, you just don't see things. It takes a whole community to communicate things to parents."

Relatives of Mary Sturdevant, 51, the mother of Hollis' ex-girlfriend, and Cory Shcolnik, 18, the girl's new boyfriend, appeared to be stunned by the verdict.

"We're all disappointed. Everybody feels a little somber right now. Just knowing that Hollis will still be alive and his parents can still visit him just hurts," said Lee Shcolnik, Cory's father. "Justice was not served. For me, I don't want to let the anger overtake me. I want to remember and honor Cory in my life."

Earlier Saturday, Brett Hollis apologized for the killings in a brief, final statement to jurors. He did not testify during the trial, which started Feb. 22. Hollis spoke in a strong voice and stood by the jury box, with his hands in his pants pockets.

"I know there is nothing I can really say to you to excuse what happened. I've always accepted responsibility for what I've done," Hollis said. "I'm exceedingly sorry for the pain I have inflicted. I can't really explain how or why about what I did."

Saturday was the first day that Hollis openly displayed his emotions. He cried while his parents separately pleaded with jurors to spare his life, wiping away tears with the sleeve of his sweater as Blair Hollis left the witness stand. Hollis clenched his jaw while Myers questioned his father on cross-examination.

On Monday, jurors deliberated about three hours before convicting Hollis of murder and other charges in the killings of Shcolnik and Sturdevant. He used his father's .22-caliber pistol to shoot them in the head at close range after forcing his way into Sturdevant's St. Andrews home shortly after midnight on Nov. 16, 1997.

The jury also determined that Hollis tied the girl, now 18, down to her bed and raped her repeatedly until she persuaded him to free her and turn himself in to police. The State is not using the girl's name because the newspaper generally does not identify sexual assault victims.

Richard Hollis and Blair Hollis testified Saturday that they were stunned when they learned that their son had been arrested for killing Shcolnik and Sturdevant. They said they never detected that their son had serious emotional problems and never knew that he had become so obsessed with the girl that he would kill his rival. Richard and Blair Hollis cried on the witness stand and at times found it difficult to speak.

"He loved her too much. It was never puppy love," Blair Hollis said. "They had gone back and forth so much that I didn't think they were good for each other. We didn't see the extent of what was going in Brett's mind."

Blair Hollis told jurors that the killings remain so painful for her family that they still cannot discuss them in any depth. Her middle son, Walker Hollis, a Batesburg-Leesville police officer, abruptly left the courtroom while his father testified.

Jurors had to weigh whether the killings resulted from a jealous rage brought on by a serious mental illness or reflected a pattern of increasingly aggressive behavior Hollis displayed toward people he thought were thwarting him.

In their closing statements, Hollis' attorneys pleaded with jurors to closely review detailed testimony about complex emotions generated in Hollis' affair with the girl. Their relationship included frequent sex in their homes while their parents slept, body mutilation, suicide threats, a pregnancy scare and talk of marriage. Hollis and the girl dated off and on for about a year,

starting in the fall of 1996.

"This has been an emotionally charged trial. What happened on Nov. 16, 1997, was horrific," said **Jack Swerling**, one of Hollis' attorneys. "We have never sought to cast blame away from Brett Hollis. We're seeking to explain why this happened."

Court testimony painted a portrait of two flawed teen-agers who never should have dated. Hollis, then 17, and the girl, then 16, struggled to cope with their emotions in an adult, marriage-like relationship that they did not have the capability to handle, a psychiatrist testified.

Normal teen-age emotions of low self-esteem, rejection, jealousy and love were twisted into murderous rage. Hollis told police he "snapped" when he saw the girl kissing Shcolnik on a couch in the living room of her home.

"They had an intense relationship, but it was not a good relationship. The two of them should never have been brought together," **Swerling** said. "I'm asking you to take into consideration what caused him to explode."

Dr. Donna Schwartz-Watts, a forensic psychiatrist hired by Hollis' attorneys, testified Saturday that Hollis suffers from borderline personality disorder, a serious mental illness. She said his illness caused him to overreact to rejection by girlfriends and others.

"His emotions are extremely intense. This is the kind of kid who can appear normal to many people. People who have been involved in relationships with him see a very different side of him," Schwartz-Watts said. "He will go out of his way to not be rejected. His relationships are a lot more intense than somebody else's would be."

The psychiatrist said Hollis' mental illness combined with the girl's emotional problems to create a "toxic relationship" between the two troubled teen-agers. At times, she said Hollis has become psychotic and heard voices in his head.

Hollis' illness manifested itself most visibly in his relationships with other people, Schwartz-Watts said. She said people with borderline personality disorder often are spurred to violence by emotional impulses and 15 percent of people with the illness commit suicide.

In his closing statement, Myers said Hollis, who wanted to become a sniper in the Marine Corps, planned the killings with military-like precision. He gathered a pistol, shotgun, ammunition and rope in a gym bag at his parents' home near Irmo and then drove to Sturdevant's home.

"He's in combat mode. G.I. Brett. Homicidal Hollis. He's got all his ammo and his weapons. He's hell-bent on killing," said Myers, who put on his trademark coal-black suit shortly before making his closing statement. "He's not going to let his prey get away. He had malice in his heart and murder in his mind."

Myers grabbed the pistol used in the murders, held the barrel inches from his head and re-enacted the shots that killed Shcolnik and Sturdevant. He told jurors how Shcolnik, who already had been shot in the neck, yelled, "No, Brett," right before Hollis fired the fatal shot into Shcolnik' right temple.

"He's begging for his life. Did he give him mercy? Not G.I. Brett, Homicidal Hollis. He's consumed with malice," Myers said. "He is obsessed. He is possessed, and he is controlling. He's a murderer, an aggravated murderer."

Hollis refused to accept the girl's decision to end their relationship, Myers said. Two months before the killings, he threatened to kill Shcolnik at Columbiana Centre, and as a result of that threat, mall officials permanently banned him from the mall.

Myers told jurors Hollis' criminal conduct continued after he was jailed, following his arrest for the murders. He plotted three times to try to escape from jail, including one case where he chiseled a small hole in the cement-block wall in his cell with a metal speaker cover.

While in jail, Hollis also cut tattoos all over his body, including the phrase "Live fast" on his right fingers and the phrase, "Kill slow" on his left fingers. Shortly before the trial started, he cut several new tattoos on his left fingers to partially obscure the phrase, "Kill slow."

"He wants to get out, and he won't stop trying to get out," Myers said. "You want to let that girl live in fear for the rest of her life? We expect the death penalty."

On Saturday morning, Johnson replaced a male juror with a female juror who was the sole remaining alternate juror, changing the jury's composition to seven women and five men. He took that action because a woman the male juror knows spoke to him Friday night while jurors ate dinner at a Lexington restaurant.

The woman told the male juror from a distance what she thought Hollis' punishment should be. State Law Enforcement Division agents assigned to guard jurors reported the incident to Johnson.

A week ago, Johnson replaced a female juror with a male juror who was an alternate because the woman improperly expressed an opinion about the case. That changed the jury's composition to six men and six women.

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A Lexington County jury could have given Brett Hollis the death penalty for murders of his ex-girlfriend's mother and boyfriend.



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