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## BECKHAM GETS LIFE FAMILIES SAY DECISION WILL HELP START HEALING

*CLIF LeBLANC and WENDY WARREN, Staff Writer*

Moments after the life sentence, the convicted killer's big brother hugged the murdered woman's father. "I think you've just seen the healing begin," said Bill Beckham.

The ill feelings between two of Newberry County's most powerful families seemed to slowly begin to lift Friday as Steve Beckham was led to a prison cell for at least 30 years. "I don't believe there could be any winners. Maybe we could stop losing anymore," said the defendant's 47-year-old brother. "We just have to take it one step at a time and we have to do it for the sake of the children."

The seven-man, five-woman jury of Oconee County residents did not sentence Beckham to die. Their decision: Life in prison for the 37-year-old bishop's son convicted of masterminding the murder of his estranged wife, Vickie Lander Beckham.

They did that even though they found aggravating circumstances - the victim was kidnapped and tortured and Beckham directed another man to murder - that could warrant a death sentence.

Perhaps jurors accepted Beckham's own request.

Two hours before their verdict, Beckham stood before jury and asked for mercy for the sake of his three children.

"Life in prison doesn't appeal to me," he said in a hushed and halting statement a few feet from the jury box. "Dying might be easier for me, but not for my children. I just don't want my children hurt anymore."

He spoke with his shoulders slightly hunched and nervously rubbed his thumbs against his forefingers. "I just wanted you to see I'm Stephen Beckham and I'm human. I'm not just Stephen Beckham the defendant."

He admitted making "huge mistakes": He was involved in drugs and associated with Richard Anderson, the hulking topless-bar bouncer who struck the blows that killed Vickie Beckham, daughter of state Sen. Jim Lander.

"It caused other people a lot of pain," Beckham said. "I guess for that I apologize."

Jolene Lander, the victim's mother, said she hopes the trial and life sentence will begin to restore the loving family she remembers before June 12, 1994 - the day Vickie Beckham died

"Hopefully as time goes by the grandchildren will return to the feelings they had toward their Lander grandparents," said the mother of six living children.

But, she said, "I don't think anything would feel like justice to me for Vickie's death."

The Beckhams and Landers say they want healing for Shannon, Andrew and Samuel, the children whose mother is dead and father her convicted murderer.

Shannon, 17, and 14-year-old Andrew were near their father throughout the 18-day trial. But they weren't in the courtroom when the sentence was announced.

The teen-agers went to see their maternal grandparents Thursday night hoping the senator could save their surviving parent from a possible death sentence.

The lawmaker said he tried to find "some solution for the sake of the grandchildren. But that was not to be." He declined to elaborate.

"He explained that he did not have the power to do the things they seemed to perceive that he did," Jolene Lander said.

In the end, the senator's influence was not needed.

As the court clerk read the sentence, Beckham sagged slightly. One of his lawyers dropped his head in relief.

No one in the courtroom moved or spoke. But the tension -state troopers were posted near each family - eased a little.

Beckham's lawyers said they wanted the sentence to be an "emotional catharsis." They had decided over lunch at Burger King on Friday to call only a fraction of their 32 witnesses and concentrate on the emotional appeals of Beckham's family.

"We decided to let the jury hear the kids," said defense attorney **Jack Swerling**.

'All I've got.' The defense presented six relatives and friends of Beckham's, among them the son of a former governor.

Jim Edwards called the defendant "a man of honor" and an exemplary father.

"If every man treated his children like Stephen Beckham treated his children, America would be a better place," said the son of former Gov. James B. Edwards.

Beckham's family - including his father, mother, big brother and children testified - that they had no clue that he hung out in topless bars or used and sold cocaine, as testimony has showed.

"It's possible to hate what someone does but not hate that person," Bill Beckham said. "I love my brother. I will always love my brother."

The defense saved its best witness for last.

Shannon Beckham brought her father, her brother and at least one juror to tears.

"I'm daddy's little girl," said the 17-year-old Wofford College freshman. "He loves us more than anything. He's all I've got left."

Andrew Beckham, 14, hung his head and planted his face in his hands as he sat behind his tearful father.

Shannon Beckham recounted an upbringing with parents who were there at dance recitals, beauty pageants and her induction into an academic honors group.

She punctuated her tears with laughter in the courtroom.

When asked if her parents required the children to do chores, she craned her neck from the witness stand and smiled slyly at her brother. "I did mine," she answered. "Sometimes he'd pay me to do his or he'd blackmail me."

Chief prosecutor Townes Jones said he was reluctant to grill grieving family members. But, he said, he never had second thoughts about seeking the death penalty against the son of the priest who baptized him, now-retired Episcopal Bishop William A. Beckham.

Jones said he saw tears from Steve Beckham, but no real signs of remorse. "I don't know how he would go about exhibiting signs of remorse," the prosecutor said.

Prosecutors did not present the strongest case they could have, however. Deputy prosecutor Michael T. Coulter said the government wanted to keep the jury's attention on the brutality of the crime.

Only Jolene Lander testified for her large family about the loss of Vickie Beckham. Only one additional prosecution witness testified about Steve Beckham's deadly intentions.

The only evidence that Vickie Beckham was tortured was clinical testimony from a pathologist who said she suffered four to 15 minutes before dying of a beating that broke her neck.

Years of plotting. The strongest new evidence that Beckham was determined to kill his wife and anyone who could expose him came from a former prisoner who turned state's evidence.

Jerry Ward, a prisoner who negotiated deals that reduced three life sentences he faced to 35 months, testified that Beckham wanted Anderson killed in jail.

Ward said Beckham made a number of incriminating statements in jail: He preferred using money that was going to an additional attorney to "put it on Richard Anderson's head." It was "impossible" that a bloody fingerprint was found on his dead wife's car. And Vickie Beckham was a "bitch" and their children "would understand" when they got older.

Ward's testimony was overshadowed by Beckham's plea to jurors and the sight of his children, who said they haven't accepted his conviction.

They immediately hugged their father as he turned from the jury and walked back to the defense table.

"They need him," **Swerling** said in closing arguments. "But he won't be there physically for any of the things they will enjoy."

As his attorney pleaded, Beckham and his children sat with their hands clasped together.

Imploring jurors not to condemn Beckham, **Swerling** said: "It's so easy to ask for death. But life is precious. And these children, they need Stephen Beckham alive."

Shannon Beckham holds the hand of her father, Steve Beckham, as the prosecutor presents his closing arguments Friday in the sentencing phase of Steve Beckham's murder for hire trial. For the first time in the three-week trial, Steve Beckham spoke to the jury, pleading for his life. He received life in prison with the possibility of parole in 30 years.

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Page: B3

## SOLICITOR GETS HELP TO PROSECUTE BECKHAM

*Clif LeBlanc, Staff Writer*

Prosecutors seeking the death penalty against Steve Beckham have asked for and gotten help from another solicitor experienced in capital cases.

Knox McMahon, a senior prosecutor with the 5th Judicial Circuit, joined the Beckham prosecution team Aug. 30. The 11th-hour addition brings about a dozen years of courtroom experience in death-penalty cases to a team headed by 8th Circuit Solicitor Townes Jones.

"I guess what it says is he's expecting a very resourceful defense," William McAninch, USC law school professor and criminal-law expert, said of Jones.

"Beckham's got the heavy artillery," McAninch said Tuesday, referring to highly touted Columbia defense lawyers **Jack Swerling** and Dick Harpootlian. "I think it's a little unfair to say it's a sign of (prosecution) weakness. I just think he's trying to be prepared."

Jury selection begins Monday in the Upstate. Sequestered jurors will be moved to Newberry to hear testimony that's expected to begin next Wednesday.

Beckham is accused of arranging to have his estranged wife, Vickie Lander Beckham, beaten to death June 12, 1994, and trying to make it look like a traffic accident. She was a daughter of Newberry Sen. Jim Lander.

Jones requested help Aug. 29 from the attorney general's office, records show. McMahon was assigned to the case the next day. Neither Jones nor McMahon could be reached Tuesday.

McMahon's former boss, 11th Circuit Solicitor Donnie Myers, described his ex-deputy as a skilled legal strategist who has experience prosecuting cases against **Swerling** and Harpootlian.

In another development in the Beckham case, defense lawyers have been granted access to the military record of co-defendant Richard Anderson.

The former Myrtle Beach bouncer is accused of beating Vickie Beckham to death in a clearing near the home of Steve Beckham's father, retired Episcopal Bishop William Beckham. Steve Beckham lived on the property. But Anderson struck an agreement to testify against Steve Beckham in exchange for being spared the death penalty.

Newberry Circuit Court Judge Thomas Hughston, who is not the trial judge, signed an order last week directing that Anderson's personnel and medical records be given to the defense.

The order does not make clear what the defense wants to do with the information. A gag order prohibits lawyers and others involved in the case from making public comment.

Clif LeBlanc covers law enforcement and security issues. Call him at 771-8664.



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