

Cloniger sentenced to life in prison

Judge follows recommendation of jury in stabbing

By Jessica Coleman
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WASHINGTON, Va. — A Rappahannock County Circuit Court judge sentenced convicted murderer Ira Wayne Cloniger to life in prison Friday for fatally stabbing Edward C. Fletcher last summer.

Cloniger's lawyer, Bonnie Hoffman, the deputy public defender for Loudoun, Fauquier and Rappahannock counties, said Fletcher raped Cloniger's girlfriend, Helen Pierce, and Cloniger retaliated in a drunken rage. The defense had hoped for a verdict of voluntary manslaughter and a maximum 10-year prison sentence, but a jury of seven women and five men found Cloniger guilty of first-degree murder in January. They recommended a life sentence for the murder that occurred in Cloniger's home at 712 Gid

Brown Hollow Drive on July 2, 2006.

Nearly eight months later, Judge Jeffrey W. Parker followed their recommendation, sentencing Cloniger to life

after a proceeding in which Hoffman called four witnesses to testify on the defendant's behalf.

Pierce, the mother of his children, testified that Cloniger is a good parent and is needed to



Cloniger

help provide for their children.

"He's a good father," she said. "I know what he did was wrong. He knows what he did was wrong. If he spends the rest of his life in prison, I don't see how that will solve anything. He needs to be with his kids, his mom, his sister. He's a good person. He really is."

Anna Bell Cloniger, the defendant's mother, testified that Cloniger has made a change in his life for the better since he has been in prison.

"I need Wayne at home but I know he's got to do time for what he's done," she said. "To

me, I think if Eddie had never touched Helen, Wayne would have never touched Eddie."

Hoffman also called Shirley Alger, the chaplain of the Page County Jail, and Paul Berghaus, for whom Cloniger did some construction work, to the witness stand.

Alger testified that Cloniger had been saved, and had brought several other inmates to church with him. Berghaus testified that Cloniger was a respectful and diligent worker.

Cloniger also spoke on his own behalf before the sentence

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was handed down. He read from several pages for nearly 30 minutes, covering a broad range of topics. He sobbed uncontrollably several times throughout the speech, particularly when discussing the moment when he said Pierce woke him, screaming that she had been raped by Fletcher. He referred to Fletcher as his son throughout.

He spoke extensively about his father. He mentioned a time when his father actually shot him in the face. He said that he always wanted to be just like his father.

"I was programmed by my father and how he thought life should be lived," Cloniger said. "I

really don't know what's wrong with me or my thinking. It's like I talk another language or I'm from another planet. ... I'm asking you, sir, to send me to a mental institution. Please, I really need help ... I've never received any help from the system."

Hoffman further argued for leniency for Cloniger, saying that he was a product of his environment and the circumstances in which he found himself.

"We're all a product of the different things we've experienced in our lives," she said. "Anyone who has spent an hour with him will find it hard to reconcile the person who committed these crimes with the person they get to know."

Commonwealth's Attorney Peter H. Luke, however, disagreed. He said that nothing presented during the proceedings changed the jury's recommendation.

"The commonwealth believes that because of his extensive criminal record ... the chances of rehabilitation for Mr. Cloniger are slim to none," Luke said. "The commonwealth believes there's been nothing presented here today that mitigates what the jury recommended."

Parker agreed with the commonwealth's attorney.

"When an individual commits violent offenses repeatedly there has to be a penalty paid for it," he said. "This court does

not believe that the jury was in error [in its recommendation of a life sentence]."

Fletcher's family said they were relieved that the proceedings were over and that Cloniger would spend the rest of his life behind bars.

"He got what he should have got," said Claudia Mae Carbaugh, Fletcher's mother. "I know [Eddie's] smiling."

"Not only did he destroy a part of us, but you have to look at what he did to his own family," said Kelvin Carbaugh, Fletcher's uncle. "The only reason he was crying is because he's never going to be a free man again."

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