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Murder trial ends in sentences for two defendants

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By Michelle Gentile




Staff writer

JUPITER — A co-defendant in the shooting trial of a 21-year-old Jupiter man arranged a plea deal with prosecutors and testified against the man who the jury considered the principal in the murder.

Both defendants in the murder case of Denny Rowland paid a price.


In a trial that



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began April 7,
 Zachary Zeman
 was found guilty of first-degree murder and three other serious felonies last week.



The other co-defendant, Rikardo Alvarenga, pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and will spend his 20s, and most of his 30s, in jail for a mistake that he said leaves him crushed and remorseful.

"He's so very sorry Denny died that night and that this ever happened," said Ron Chapman, Mr. Alvarenga's attorney. "It has wreaked havoc on all the families involved and it's just a tragedy."

Mr. Alvarenga was sentenced to 20 years in prison last week, and since he has already served two years, that will make him eligible for parole when he is around 37.

"I don't blame Ricky," said Charla Las Casas, Mr. Rowland's mother who testified against Mr. Zeman last week. "I knew Ricky didn't have the heart to do this to my kid. He was forced by gunpoint."

On the night of Feb 10, 2006, a trip to collect some money turned into homicide.

Police reports showed that Mr. Zeman and Ricky Alvarenga went to the home of Mr. Rowland to collect \$140, reimbursement for a hotel room. While they were there, the two forced Mr. Rowland into his Jupiter home that he shared with his mother and brother, Joey, and demanded the money.

Ms. Las Casas was ordered, at gunpoint, to kneel with her head down but saw what transpired.

"It happened so quick. My thoughts were twirling and I knew who shot Denny. I knew who put the gun to my face and it was Zach," said Ms. Las Casas.

During trial, there was confusion about who actually pulled the trigger.

Police reports, testimony and, ultimately, and the 12- panel jury indicated Mr. Zeman was the principal in the murder.

Also discussed during trial was the gun's ownership.

The gun used to shoot Mr. Rowland was stolen from a Tampa man and Mr. Zeman had moved from Palm Beach County to Tampa.

Last words

"Mom, I think you need to call 911," Mr. Rowland told his mother as he lay bleeding on the kitchen floor.

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The bullet had entered into his right armpit, cleared through his right lung and severed his aorta. It came out his left lung, which is why he could not breathe, said Ms. Las Casas.

"What a horrific tragedy, as I watched my son get shot, and I sat with him, struggling to breathe, I knew from my nursing background he had only seconds to live," she read to the judge during the victim's impact statement.

Mr. Zeman shouted out, "What about what your son did to me? He shot me."

Circuit Judge Jorge Labarga called a recess following her statement. Before the verdict was read, he cautioned spectators about any outbursts or "be arrested on the spot."

Over the last two years, while in jail, Mr. Alvarenga and Mr. Zeman have been in altercations.

At one brief stint in the courthouse last year, Mr. Zeman jumped over a guard and attacked Mr. Alvarenga.

"As they were coming to court one day, Mr. Zeman hit him and as he walked into the courtroom it was obvious he was bruised," said Mr. Chapman. "As long as they keep them in separate facilities, I think everything will be OK."

Ms. Las Casas feels differently. She is worried for Mr. Alvarenga's life and says that his life has been repeatedly threatened by Mr. Zeman.

"Ricky told me that Zach wrote on a kite (prison slang for note) that he was trying to hire two guys to kill Ricky in county jail," said Ms. Las Casas. "I don't want any danger for Ricky."

Mr. Rowland was an aspiring song promoter and songwriter, who was good friends with Mr. Alvarenga.

More than 400 of his peers attended Mr. Rowland's funeral and another 50 celebrated the second anniversary of his death.

"I'm still in disbelief over the death of my son. I just thought buying baby clothes, cribs and his clothes as he became an adult was just part of raising my son. I never believed, in a million years, that I would be buying a casket," said Ms. Las Casas.

"I'm not a vengeful person and I don't want harm coming to Zach or to Ricky, but I do need closure and that means the right punishment for (these kids) making the most stupid choice of their lives."

"I can close a chapter of this book," said Ms. Las Casas. "I'm on the way to healing now."

Mr. Zeman is expected to be back in court for formal sentencing on June 12.

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