

Convicted murderer re-sentenced in 1988 killings

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After spending more than 30 years on Oregon's death row,, a man convicted of raping and killing two German tourists in 1988 now has a chance at freedom. But not if Coos County District Attorney Paul Frasier has anything to say about it.

After the Oregon Legislature changed the state law regarding aggravated murder in 2019 and the state Supreme Court ruled all inmates on death row that do not qualify based on the new standards must be re-sentenced, David Lynn Simonson had a new sentencing hearing in Coos County on Monday.

Frasier explained that since life in prison without the possibility of parole was not available when the crime was committed, the most he could ask for was life in prison with a possibility of parole after 30 years.

"I made the argument based on the facts of the case that if there ever was a case that deserved consecutive sentencing, this was the one," Frasier said. "Judge (Martin) Stone agreed with me."

Stone sentenced Simonson to consecutive sentences of life in prison with the possibility of parole after 30 years. That means if Simonson were granted parole on one case, he would still have to serve the second before being released. Maybe.

Frasier admitted he was not certain what the state law was in 1988, so there is a chance Simonson could ask for parole. But if that happens, Frasier vowed to fight every attempt in an effort to keep the convicted murderer behind bars.

"As long as I'm district attorney, we will appear at the parole board and appeal any parole," Frasier said.

Frasier said his insistence on keeping Simonson behind bars is because the case was heinous. In 1988, Simonson and Jeffrey Ray Williams picked up two female German tourists who were hitchhiking up the coast near the Oregon/California border. The women were picked up just inside the California border and driven through Curry County into Coos County.

"These two kidnapped two German citizens," Frasier said. "They kidnapped them in California, brought them into Oregon and eventually into Coos County. They raped and murdered both individuals."

Frasier said Simonson and Williams took the young women deep into the forest, where they raped them, tied them up and shot them in the head. They were found several days later tied together with their pants down.

"At the time, police had no idea who did it," Frasier said.

But law enforcement quickly learned that Simonson was talking about the crime. When they brought him in, he readily admitted he shot the women, although he said Williams made him do it.

"Mr. Simonson personally killed both of them," Frasier said. "He was arrested and confessed to the murders."

Coos County Sheriff Craig Zanni said he feels Simonson should have remained on death row.

"One of the reasons the Simonson case is significant is the two victims were raped and murdered, neither of them spoke English and they were scheduled to leave the company in a couple of days," Zanni said. "It didn't have to happen."

Simonson pleaded guilty to the murders and was sentenced to death. Simonson appealed the sentence and three times was able to have it overturned. But every time the facts were presented to Coos County juries, he was re-sentenced to death.

Williams died in prison in 2020, shortly after the Legislature changed the law regarding aggravated murder.

Frasier said he is disappointed Simonson is off death row, but he respects the law.

"The problem I had and I still have is the voters in Oregon voted to have the death penalty," Frasier said.

"The Legislature decided the best way to stop executions in Oregon is to change the definition of aggravated murder, which is what they did. It is almost impossible to get the death penalty anymore."

The last time an inmate was executed in Oregon was 1997.

