

Two Nassau County, New York jail guards plead guilty in fatal beating of inmate

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Two Nassau County, New York jail guards pled guilty on January 12 in the 1999 beating death of 38-year-old Thomas Pizzuto, a prisoner who was serving a 90-day sentence for a traffic violation. The two guards, Edward Velazquez, 32, and Patrick Regnier, 36, admitted their crime in the Federal District Court in Uniondale, New York.

At least 100 corrections officers attended the court proceeding to express support for their fellow guards. Some of them tried to block photographers from taking pictures of the defendants while others shouted angry epithets at the reporters. Pizzuto's mother, who was present at the trial, commented, "I walked up here and cried because I couldn't believe that this is the world we live in, that these people are backing up murderers."

The violations of federal civil rights laws carry a maximum sentence of 30 years to life in prison. Sentencing for the two men is to take place April 7. Lawyers for Velazquez and Regnier said they plan to argue that the two officers never intended to kill the prisoner, and the sentences should be reduced to those warranted by a conviction for manslaughter.

Until last week the two guards had maintained their innocence. They only changed their story as their defense began to unravel. Central to this was evidence provided by another guard, Ivano Bavaro, 32, who as part of a plea bargaining deal admitted that he had acted as the lookout for Velazquez and Regnier as they beat the unarmed inmate inside his cell on January 8, 1999. Thomas Pizzuto died five days later from a ruptured spleen.

When Judge Jacob Mishler asked the two defendants to explain what happened on January 8, both men attempted to place significant blame on their supervisor Cpl. Gary Pincus. Pincus has already pled guilty to not reporting the crime, and has also agreed to cooperate

with prosecutors and testify against the two guards. Another guard, Joseph Bergen, will stand trial for filing a false report claiming that Pizzuto received his injury when he slipped and fell in the shower.

When asked by the judge what actually happened in that cell, Velazquez stated: "Without provocation, your honor, I pushed him [Mr. Pizzuto] back to his bed and slapped him with an open hand and punched him." Regnier admitted that he landed on the prisoner's back with his knee.

Regnier then stated that when the attack was over Thomas Pizzuto told him: "Leave me alone. All I want is my methadone." The two guards apparently attacked Pizzuto, a recovering heroin addict, because they didn't like the way he was asking for his needed dosage of methadone. Velazquez admitted that he went to Pizzuto's cell "to quiet him down and use unreasonable force if necessary."

One of the reasons this case came to light was the report of a prisoner in a nearby cell who overheard the beating. Lawyers for the Pizzuto family previously reported that they have medical evidence that he was stomped to death.

In the eight years before this incident, more than 100 inmates have stated that they were mistreated in the facility. Last March, another guard was found responsible for the 1993 beating of a retarded inmate with a frying pan.

See Also:

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