

Virginia woman executed, Georgia and California executions to follow

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25 September 2010

Teresa Lewis, a 41-year-old grandmother, was put to death by lethal injection Thursday night in Virginia's Greensville Correctional Facility. The execution went forward after the US Supreme Court on Tuesday rejected a stay-of-execution request from Lewis, who has been diagnosed as borderline mentally retarded.

Described as tense and fearful as she was led to the execution chamber, Lewis was strapped to a gurney, surrounded by 14 prison guards, and injected with a lethal poison. Her last words, addressed to the one-way glass where witnesses viewed the execution, were intended for her stepdaughter: "I just want Kathy to know that I love you, and I'm very sorry."

Thousands of people, including prominent public figures, voiced opposition to her execution, as did human rights organizations around the world. In an open letter to Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, Amnesty International condemned the execution as unjust and stated that the prosecution's version of her crime "is now under serious question" that "the courts have failed to resolve."

Fellow inmates, prison chaplains and her lawyer, Jim Rocap, all expressed sorrow and affection for Lewis, who was described as a caring and gentle woman. Many inmates praised her for her ability to comfort them by singing gospel hymns. Rocap said she had a "remarkable, spiritual peace about her" on the day of her death, adding, "Teresa Lewis is a poster child for why the death penalty process is broken."

Lewis pled guilty in 2002 of masterminding the killing of her husband, Julian Lewis, and stepson, Charles Lewis, in order to collect a \$250,000 life insurance policy. The victims were shot dead in their beds as they slept by Lewis' lover and a friend. Lewis left the trailer door unlocked and waited 45 minutes after the shootings to call for emergency help.

The two men who actually carried out the killings received sentences of life in prison. Lewis, who was seriously impaired by a prescription drug addiction at the time, never denied her guilt and expressed tremendous sorrow over the murders. She had no prior history of violence.

Lewis's lawyers argued that she was mentally incapable of masterminding the murders. On two IQ tests administered by Dr. Philip Costanzo of Duke University, Lewis performed below the level of mental retardation—an IQ of 70—for planning and organization. Lewis was found to have an IQ of between 70 and 72.

One of the gunmen, Matthew Shallenberger, was Lewis's lover at the time and admitted that she was not the ringleader in the plot. In a letter written from prison, Shallenberger revealed that he had manipulated Lewis and that he had planned and organized the murders.

Rodney Fuller, the second gunman, signed an affidavit confirming that Shallenberger played the leading role in planning and carrying out the crime. (See: "US Supreme Court clears way for execution of Virginia woman")

Like millions of others held in prisons throughout the country, Teresa Lewis's case speaks to the brutality of American society—both in her fate at the hands of the justice system and in the poverty and backward conditions in which she lived.

Lewis was raised in a very poor, strict, religious family in Danville, Virginia. The region has seen a collapse of the textile industry and decline in wages, jobs and population. In turn, social problems like petty crimes and drug addiction have steadily worsened.

Lewis, struggling with school because of her mental limitations, dropped out at 16, married and became a mother by 17, divorcing a few years later with two

children to raise. She went from job to job, holding 50 low-wage positions between 1987 and 2000. The uncertainty and pain in her life pushed her into a debilitating prescription drug addiction.

Lewis is among 39 prisoners who have been executed so far this year. In the next month alone, 12 more executions are scheduled.

On September 27, 31-year-old prisoner Brandon Rhode is scheduled to be executed in Georgia. Rhode was convicted in 1998 of killing three members of a family who returned home while he was attempting to commit a burglary there.

Rhode's execution had been scheduled for September 21. A few hours before the scheduled lethal injection, however, he attempted suicide in a holding cell. He slit his throat and arms using razor blades supplied to him by a prison guard. Rhode lost half the blood in his body before being revived at a nearby hospital.

He went into traumatic shock and may have suffered brain damage due to the severe blood loss. Rhode's attorneys filed to have his execution stayed, saying he is not mentally competent and suffered fetal alcohol syndrome, but the request was denied on Thursday. The execution was scheduled for Friday at 7 p.m., but a second appeal resulted in a last-minute stay until Monday at 4 p.m.

Brian Kammer, one of the prisoner's attorneys, told the Georgia Supreme Court that Rhodes was incompetent and did not have an understanding of what was going to happen to him or why. Executing an incompetent prisoner is a violation of standards on cruel and unusual punishment. "He's utterly terrified and just hopeless," Kammer said. "He was very morose, frightened and subdued. This was a product of him just being in terror, of losing hope altogether."

Lawyers want his execution stayed until an investigation is carried out on the reason Rhode was given razor blades and left unattended. This has been denied.

Since his suicide attempt, Rhode has been subjected to grossly inhumane treatment, his lawyers said. When he was released from the hospital, he was given no pain medication. He was made to wear a filthy, blood-covered jumpsuit, then strapped into a "torture chair" that caused him excruciating pain. According to court filings, he was later put into shackles and restraints that were so painful he pleaded to be put back into the chair.

After an injunction staying executions in the state was lifted, California may carry out its first execution in five years next week. The request to lift the injunction came from state Attorney General Jerry Brown, the Democratic Party candidate for governor. Brown previously espoused anti-capital punishment views.

California inmate Albert Greenwald Brown is scheduled to be put to death on September 29.



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