

Georgia executes first woman in 70 years

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The state of Georgia executed Kelly Gissendaner early Wednesday morning at the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison in Jackson. She was the first woman put to death in the state in 70 years. An execution is scheduled for Wednesday in Oklahoma and another in Virginia on Thursday.

Gissendaner, 47, was scheduled to be executed at 7 p.m., but the lethal injection was held up while authorities waited for the US Supreme Court to respond to appeals on her behalf. At 8:30 p.m. the high court said it had denied a request to stay her execution, offering no explanation for the denial. The Supreme Court rejected a second request for a stay at around 10:45 p.m., and rejected a third at about 11:30 p.m.

Shortly after the final appeal was exhausted, Gissendaner was injected with a single dose of pentobarbital. She cried and sang “Amazing Grace” before the powerful sedative took over and she went silent, while one of her attorneys sobbed. A Georgia Department of Corrections spokeswoman confirmed that she died at 12:21 a.m.

Gissendaner came within hours of death two times previously this year, the first on February 25 due to winter weather and “related scheduling issues,” the second on March 2 when prison authorities called off the execution because the lethal drug to be used “appeared cloudy.”

Gissendaner, 47, was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1997 murder of her husband, Douglas Gissendaner. On Monday, a state judge denied a motion to stay her execution. Her execution went forward after the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles denied her clemency on Tuesday.

Gissendaner’s three children called for her life to be spared. Daughter Kayla Gissendaner said in a statement, “My dad would not want my mom to be executed, even knowing her role in his murder. ... I had to face what my mom had done and find a way to

forgive her.”

More than 90,000 people signed a petition to the parole board calling for clemency. The execution proceeded despite appeals by former Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Norman Fletcher, former State Corrections Deputy Director Vanessa O’Donnell and an 11th-hour appeal by Pope Francis.

Prosecutors acknowledge that Gissendaner did not commit her husband’s murder, but plotted with her boyfriend at the time, Gregory Owen, who ultimately stabbed the victim to death. Owen pleaded guilty and received a life sentence with eligibility for parole after 25 years in exchange for testifying against Gissendaner, who turned down a similar deal.

Gissendaner was the first person in Georgia to be executed since 1976 without having committed the actual murder.

Those who called for Gissendaner’s sentence to be commuted to life in prison argued that she had turned her life around in prison, earning a theology degree in 2011 and counseling other prisoners on gaining education and preparing for life outside prison.

But the concept of prison serving as a place of rehabilitation—where individuals can develop new skills and contribute to society after committing crimes—is alien to the parole board and state prosecutors who were intent on meting out the ultimate penalty to Gissendaner.

In an interview with CNN, District Attorney Danny Porter stated: “If we take into account what she’s done since then, the only people who could be executed are people who continue to do bad things, which people who are given the death penalty can’t do because they’re in prison.”

In defense of the death penalty, Porter added perversely, “Or we would have instantaneous executions.” In other words, people sentenced to death should be executed immediately to avoid the possibility

that they might go on to do good things in prison, thereby disqualifying them from the death penalty!

Gissendaner's defense had also filed a lawsuit claiming that members of the pardon board never heard about her behavior in prison. The suit alleges she was deprived of due process after the warden at Lee Arrendale Prison distributed a memo instructing her staff at the facility not to speak to "anyone" about Gissendaner.

Gissendaner's is the first of three executions scheduled for this week in the US. Barring a last-minute reprieve, Richard Glossip will be executed in Oklahoma Wednesday. On Monday, Oklahoma's highest criminal court denied last-minute motions to stay his execution. Glossip received a last-minute temporary stay of execution only hours prior to his scheduled lethal injection on September 16, the third time he was only hours from death.

Glossip's defense team has presented new evidence that strongly points to their client's innocence, including the sworn affidavit of a former prisoner who heard a prisoner serving life in prison in connection with the murder saying he set up Glossip. The attorneys also contend that new witnesses who point to Glossip's innocence have faced intimidation by Oklahoma prosecutors.

On Thursday, Virginia plans to execute a prisoner whose attorneys claim his life should be spared because he is intellectually disabled and suffers "significant brain dysfunction." Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe on Monday denied a last-minute attempt to delay the execution of Alfredo Prieto, a Salvadorean national.

If the execution goes forward, Prieto will be the first prisoner executed in the state in nearly three years. Virginia plans to utilize a three-drug protocol, including pentobarbital obtained from Texas, the nation's leader in executions.

Kelly Gissendaner was the 21st prisoner executed in the US in 2015, and the 16th woman put to death since the reinstitution of the death penalty in 1976. The last woman executed in Georgia was Lena Baker, who was electrocuted in 1945.

Baker, a black maid, was convicted in a one-day trial for the murder of her white employer. She won a posthumous pardon by Georgia authorities in 2005 after six decades of lobbying by her family, who maintained that she killed her boss after being held against her will.

Baker testified that he had threatened her life and appeared ready to hit her with a metal bar before she fired the fatal shot.

Georgia has carried out 58 of the 1,415 executions nationwide since 1976, according to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC). Espy File records show that from 1608 to 1976, Georgia carried out 950 executions, fourth behind Virginia, New York and Pennsylvania.

Thirty-one US states, along with the US military and federal government, still have capital punishment on the books, a practice condemned by the vast majority of industrialized countries. In addition to women, those sentenced to death have included the mentally impaired, foreign nationals denied their consular rights, and those convicted of crimes committed as juveniles.

DPIC counts 3,002 prisoners on death row across the US as of April 1, 2015. The overwhelming majority of the condemned are working class and poor. Many are poorly represented and the victims of prosecutorial misconduct in a system based on vengeance and retribution. The death penalty has support at the highest levels of the US political establishment, from the US Supreme Court to President Obama.



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