

Robert Pruett, first imprisoned at age 16, executed in Texas despite questions about evidence

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Robert Pruett, 38, was executed Thursday evening at the Walls Unit in Huntsville, Texas, for the 1999 murder of a prison guard. His lethal injection proceeded after the US Supreme Court declined to issue a stay in his case about an hour before the scheduled execution. Pruett was first imprisoned at age 16, sentenced to 99 years after being on the scene at age 15 when his father stabbed a neighbor to death.

In his final statement before being put to death, according to the Canadian Press, Pruett said he hurt lot of people and a lot of people hurt him, but that he was sorry and held no grudges. “I’ve had to learn lessons in life the hard way,” he said. “One day there won’t be a need to hurt people.”

Pruett told friends who were watching the execution through a window that he loved them and, “I’m ready to go.” As the lethal dose of the sedative pentobarbital started to flow, he began to chant, “Love. Light. It’s forever.” His voice rose as he repeated the phrase, followed by obscenities. He began yelling, then slurred his words before slipping into unconsciousness.

He was pronounced dead at 6:46 p.m. local time.

In his 38-year life, Pruett saw more time imprisoned than in the outside world. His father, Sam Pruett, spent much of his son Robert’s early childhood in prison. Robert and his three siblings were raised in various trailer parks by his mother, who used drugs heavily and often struggled to feed them, he said.

After his father returned from prison, Pruett said his family sometimes had to move to flee the police, and that he was introduced to marijuana by his father at age 7. He began using drugs regularly in elementary school and was selling them by middle school.

Pruett received a 99-year prison sentence for

participating in the 1995 stabbing death of a 29-year-old neighbor, Raymond Yarbrough, outside the man’s trailer home in Channelview, east of Houston. Pruett was 15-years-old at the time of the attack.

According to court testimony from a sheriff’s detective, Pruett argued with Yarbrough and then got his father and brother to join him in attacking the man. The detective said the younger Pruett punched and kicked Yarbrough and held him down while his father stabbed the man multiple times.

The court found Robert Pruett guilty under Texas’s “law of parties,” under which any who “solicits, encourages, directs, aids, or attempts to aid” a person who commits a crime is equally liable, no matter how small his or her role. Even under the prosecution’s version of events, Pruett did not kill the man. Despite the fact that he was a teenager at the time, he was condemned to 99 years in jail, a virtual life sentence.

At age 20, while behind bars, Pruett was accused of killing correctional officer Daniel Nagle, 37, at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s McConnell Unit near Beeville. At age 22, he was sentenced to death for the crime. The conviction relied largely on the testimony of inmate eyewitnesses, who are alleged to have received favorable deals in exchange for their testimony.

Pruett maintained that he was innocent of the crime. No physical evidence has ever connected him to the killing. When the murder weapon was tested for DNA, nothing conclusive was found. Pruett avoided execution in April 2015, just hours before his scheduled death, when a state judge issued a stay so that additional DNA testing could be conducted on the rod used to stab Nagle.

New tests uncovered DNA on the rod from an unknown female who may have handled the shank during the appeals process after the original tests in 2002. Pruett's defense unsuccessfully sought more DNA testing and filed a federal civil rights lawsuit arguing their client had been denied due process. The 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the lawsuit last week, and the attorneys appealed to the US Supreme Court on Tuesday, which rejected the claim.

In 2005, the Supreme Court ruled that sentencing minors to the death penalty violated the Eighth Amendment. Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote at the time that "juveniles are more vulnerable or susceptible to negative influences and outside pressures, including peer pressure," and that "the character of a juvenile is not as well formed as that of an adult."

In 2009, the high court abolished life without parole for juveniles convicted of non-homicides, and in 2012 it abolished mandatory life sentences without parole on homicide convictions. Despite these rulings, Robert Pruett was not spared the ultimate penalty.

In his unpublished biography, quoted by the *New York Times*, Pruett writes:

"At 15 I wasn't old enough to be outside after the 11 p.m. curfew, I couldn't watch R-rated movies without adult supervision, I couldn't smoke, drink, get a tattoo, own a gun or even drive a car. Yet I was mature and reasonable enough to make decisions that would impact the rest of my life? Old enough to spend the rest of my life in prison? It is still unfathomable to me."

Pruett was the 6th inmate executed this year in Texas and the 20th put to death in the US nationwide.



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