

Florida executes Harold Gene Lucas after 50 years on death row and 5 death sentences

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Florida killed Harold Gene Lucas on Tuesday evening, ending a half-century ordeal manufactured by the state itself. Lucas was condemned to death five separate times for the same crime. Four times the Florida Supreme Court found the sentencing proceedings so badly botched that the death sentence had to be thrown out. Four times prosecutors returned to court and demanded his execution rather than accept a life sentence.

Fifty years of this grinding vengeance produced a 74-year-old man who told a judge in July that he was too tired to continue fighting. What the state calls justice is vindictiveness organized as legal procedure.

Lucas was pronounced dead at 6:18 p.m. at Florida State Prison near Starke after an intravenous sequence of etomidate, a sedative; rocuronium bromide, a paralytic that immobilizes the muscles; and potassium acetate, which stops the heart. Asked whether he had any last words, he answered, “No.”

He had awakened at 5:45 a.m. His sister was his only visitor. The executioner, as in every Florida execution, was an anonymous private citizen selected by the warden and paid \$200 for the gruesome job.

Twenty-eight witnesses filled the observation room. Reporters described Lucas’s eyes opening slightly at 6:02 p.m. and his mouth opening two minutes later. An official lifted his shoulders, shouted his name and received no response. Outside, roughly 45 protesters gathered in a drizzling rain, rang a gong and sang “Amazing Grace” as the injection began.

The crime occurred on August 13, 1976, in Bonita Springs. Lucas, then 24, had known 16-year-old Anthia “Jill” Piper for four years, had worked for her family and had dated her on and off. The relationship ended that August.

Lucas had been arrested for trespassing at her home a

week earlier, and witnesses testified that he had threatened to kill her. Piper asked her friends Terri Rice and Richard “Ricky” Byrd Jr. to stay the night because she was frightened. Lucas arrived with a rifle, shot Piper repeatedly and wounded Rice and Byrd. He was arrested the next day and convicted in February 1977.

What followed was not, as death penalty proponents habitually claim, a condemned man gaming the courts. Florida law provides for automatic direct review of every death sentence, and it was during those mandatory appeals that the state’s sentencing proceedings repeatedly collapsed.

The Florida Supreme Court vacated Lucas’s death sentence in 1979, 1982, 1986 and 1990. The reversals involved the use of an improper aggravating factor, the failure to properly weigh aggravating and mitigating circumstances, restrictions on the presentation of evidence and a sentencing order too vague to permit meaningful review. Two different judges imposed the sentences. The first died before the second resentencing. The state Supreme Court affirmed the fifth death sentence in 1992.

Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty noted that after each reversal, prosecutors could have accepted life imprisonment. Instead, they chose to seek death again at enormous public expense. Half a century later, the organization stated, “It is hard to imagine a more hollow victory.”

The man Florida spent 50 years trying to kill grew up in an Arkansas sharecropping family. His father was an alcoholic who spent the household’s money on drink and beat his wife and children. Lucas left school after the seventh grade. He began using drugs and alcohol as a young teenager and before turning 18 had used heroin, animal tranquilizers and PCP. He had no significant prior criminal history.

According to Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, experts for both the prosecution and the defense agreed that Lucas was under the influence of PCP at the time of the shooting. Psychological experts concluded that the crime would not have occurred but for his drug abuse.

The final sentencing court catalogued extensive mitigating evidence, including Lucas's lack of a significant criminal history, steady employment, good prison conduct and history of drug abuse. It sentenced him to death anyway.

Lucas expressed remorse beginning with his original sentencing testimony. The final sentencing judge, however, dismissed it as remorse "more for his legal circumstances than for the underlying offense."

The courts then closed every door. Lucas argued that decades of confinement under a sentence of death constituted cruel and unusual punishment, but the Florida Supreme Court in 2003 rejected his claim without granting an evidentiary hearing.

He also raised the constitutional challenge to Florida's sentencing system that the US Supreme Court vindicated in *Hurst v. Florida* in 2016. In 2018, however, the state Supreme Court ruled that his sentence had become final too early for him to benefit from a constitutional ruling he had anticipated by more than a decade.

Lucas was the 14th person executed in Florida this year and the 42nd under Republican Governor Ron DeSantis. The state executed 19 people in 2025, more than double its previous modern record of eight. Florida has now carried out 14 of the 24 executions in the United States this year.

DeSantis, who signed nine death warrants during his first five years in office, has been authorizing executions at a rate unseen in decades. This included the execution of two men within hours of each other on July 28.

The state machinery has been rebuilt for maximum killing. After the gunman who murdered 17 students and staff and wounded another 17 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland was sentenced to life imprisonment, DeSantis signed a law in 2023 allowing a death sentence when only eight of 12 jurors recommend death. It is the lowest threshold in the country.

The Florida Supreme Court, remade by DeSantis

appointees, upheld the law in December. Florida has exonerated 30 people from death row since 1973, more than any other state. Nearly all were condemned by non-unanimous juries or by judges who overrode jury recommendations of life imprisonment.

DeSantis has said that victims' families have waited long enough and claimed that he takes no pleasure in signing death warrants. "I don't take joy in doing that; it's a weighty thing," he said.

The acceleration has unfolded as part of a national campaign initiated by President Donald Trump. His Inauguration Day executive order in January 2025 directed the attorney general to pursue capital punishment and encourage state prosecutors to bring capital charges.

Two more Florida executions are scheduled this month: Daniel Owen Conahan Jr., 72, on September 10 and Curtis Wilkie Beasley, 77, on September 29. More than a dozen executions remain scheduled nationally for 2026.

Lucas's life followed the same trajectory as that of many people Florida has executed: rural poverty, a violent home, an abandoned education and addiction. The social order that abandoned him to poverty, violence and drug abuse found ample resources for five death sentences, decades of litigation and finally a gurney.

The same week Lucas was killed, the DeSantis administration announced new restrictions on what Florida's poorest families may buy with cash assistance averaging roughly \$250 a month. The prohibited purchases include vaping products, video games, entertainment tickets, theme park admission and other items classified as luxuries.

Capital punishment is but the sharpest expression of this system of retribution against society's most vulnerable.



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