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## Guilty plea in Prichard cold case

Mother never gave up, and finally wins justice in slaying of her son, Jettis Holifield

Saturday, August 23, 2008

By ROBERT MCLENDON

Staff Reporter

For nearly eight years, Melinda Holifield fought to keep alive the investigation into her son's 2000 slaying. Friday, she saw the gunman in the nearly forgotten cold case plead guilty to his murder.

After striking a deal with prosecutors, Tarrance Shavers admitted to shooting 20-year-old Jettis Holifield in the back of the head in front of a service station in south Prichard.

Mobile County Circuit Judge James Wood gave him a split sentence of 20 years, three of those to be served in prison and 17 to be served on probation.

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Melinda Holifield breathed sigh of relief and hugged family as she finally heard her son's killer admit his crime.

"Oh thank you, Jesus," she said. "This is such a relief."

For a long time, it didn't look like the case would see the inside of a courtroom.

The shooting had quietly faded from the public eye until the spring of 2007, when Holifield brought the story of her son's death to the Press-Register. That led to a series of articles detailing the crime and brought the case to the attention of Alabama Attorney General Troy King, who reopened the investigation.

All the new investigators had to start with was a single piece of paper. Except for the initial report saying Holifield had been shot and killed, Prichard police lost nearly everything else related to the case.

Melinda Holifield said Prichard police never even secured the scene of the crime that summer afternoon, leaving her to find her son's body lying in tall grass by the side of the road. She said she found bullet casings in the street that investigators had ignored. When she brought them to an officer, she said, he threw them in the ash tray of his squad car.

A bicycle believed to have been used in the shooting was found nearby the scene by Holifield's aunt, then lost by police.

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Mother never gave up, and finally wins justice in slaying of her son, Jettis Holifield

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"Had this case gone to trial, it would have had many problems," said King, in a telephone interview. "If it had gone in front of a jury, I wouldn't have been able to promise Ms. Holifield anything."

The backbone of the prosecution's case hung on two key pieces of evidence: DNA found in a ski mask recovered just down the street from the crime scene and the eyewitness account of an eccentric drug addict known as "Boneman."

An astute defense attorney could have cast both of those pieces of evidence into doubt, said William Dill, the prosecutor in the case.

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The DNA was collected at the time of the shooting and sent off to the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences, where it was tested and kept on file. The results showed that Shavers had worn the mask, but they also showed that he wasn't the only one to have put it on.

As for Larry "Boneman" Hamilton, defense attorney Joe "Buzz" Jordan was seeking to keep his testimony from even being presented to a jury.

Hamilton, Jordan pointed out, didn't finger Shavers in the shooting when interviewed by police after the shooting in 2000. It wasn't until King's investigators showed him a photo array years later that Hamilton positively identified Shavers.

Even if the judge had allowed Hamilton to testify that Shavers was the shooter, a jury might have discounted the testimony of an admitted drug addict with a penchant for bizarre statements.

When asked why people called him Boneman, Hamilton once told a reporter that he used to carry around a lot of bones. Asked why he would do that, he responded, "Because I'm weird."

Considering the problems with the case, Holifield said she was OK with the 20-year split sentence. She said she just wanted Shavers to stand up and admit what he had done.

"I know Jettis is resting in peace right now," she said.

Shavers' grandmother, Johnnie McNealy, was in court Friday and cried as he admitted to the shooting. As he was led out of the courtroom in chains, she stood and hugged the victim's mother, who she said she'd known for years.

"I'm just sorry for what he did," she said. "For what he put her through. For what he put me through."

The case is the first successful prosecution obtained by Alabama Attorney General Troy King's cold case unit, which was funded in the fall of 2007.

King said he created the unit because the successful resolution of cold cases helps restore people's faith in the justice system.

When you take somebody off the street in a cold case, he said, people no longer have to ask themselves, "I wonder if I will run into them at the grocery store."

For Melinda Holifield, King said, "The victory is that this isn't a cold case anymore. This is a closed case with a conviction."


"There is never really closure for victims," he said. "But there should be a time when the

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