



U.S. Department of Justice

United States Attorney Eastern District of Arkansas

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HIRED KILLER FOR DRUG CONSPIRACY SENTENCED

Little Rock, Arkansas - Jane W. Duke, Acting United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas, announced today that a federal jury sentenced Vertis Clay, a/k/a "Sinister Wayz," to life imprisonment. Last week, Clay was convicted by the same jury of conspiracy to distribute and possess marijuana, conspiracy to use a firearm during a drug trafficking offense and committing the first degree murder of Darryl Johnson with a firearm during a drug trafficking offense.

Duke noted that ordinarily judges instead of juries determine a federal criminal defendant's sentence. However, if a jury unanimously finds a person guilty of a capital crime, it must then determine by separate proceeding whether to sentence the defendant to life in prison or to death by lethal injection.

During both the trial and the sentencing phase, prosecutors focused on the especially heinous, cruel, and depraved manner in which this murder occurred; the fact that the murder was committed for pecuniary gain; and that Clay committed the murder after substantial planning and premeditation. The evidence established that Clay and his associate, Darryl Walker, were hired and paid by co-defendant Calvin Stovall to rob and murder Johnson. The jurors heard Walker describe in his testimony how he and Clay brutally murdered Johnson on July 20, 2003 in Johnson's Pine Bluff, Arkansas home. Prior to Johnson's death, he was shot in the leg, bound and blindfolded, threatened with a hot iron, sodomized with a broomstick, and repeatedly cut with a knife. A state medical examiner testified that Johnson's throat had also been slit. However, the 38-year-old Johnson was ultimately killed by Clay when Clay shot him in the back of the head at close range.

Walker previously pled guilty to murdering Johnson, which is an offense punishable by life in prison. Walker awaits sentencing by United States District Judge William R. Wilson. Stovall, whose trial was recently severed from Clay's, faces trial at a date to be determined by the court. Unlike Clay, however, Stovall is not facing the death penalty.

Duke stated, "While I am extremely proud of the effort put forth by our agents and prosecutors in this case, this is not a cause to celebrate. We are simply very thankful that truth and justice prevailed." Duke added, "Darryl Johnson died a tortured death that was akin to something you would see in a mobster movie, not something you would expect to happen in Arkansas. My heart goes out to Mr. Johnson's family because they will forever be haunted by the brutal way in which he was taken from them. I can only hope that this conviction and sentence gives them some small measure of solace."

This case was the result of an extensive four year Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigation by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Investigation of the drug trafficking organization has resulted in the conviction of 24 individuals in five separate cases. In addition to DEA and ICE, other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies have assisted in this case, including: The Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation Division (IRS CID), The Arkansas State Police, The Arkansas Highway Police, The Pine Bluff Police Department, The Sherwood Police Department, The Little Rock Police Department, and The Hazen Police Department. The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Anne Gardner and Joe Volpe.

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