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## Sarah gets life Judge tells defendant she had plenty of opportunities to 'stop the senselessness'

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HAILEY -- Sarah Johnson, the Bellevue teen convicted of murder, was sentenced Thursday to life in prison without the possibility of parole for the brutal killings of her mother and father in 2003.

But, it weren't for her young age, she could have been sentenced to death under Idaho law, 5th District Judge Barry Wood told the 18-year-old.

"If this were a death penalty case, you would be a candidate for it," the judge said.

On the second day of Johnson's sentencing hearing, the Blaine County courtroom was full of family, former jurors, media and onlookers. Johnson, who appeared wearing a prison-issued orange jumpsuit, remained cuffed at the wrists and ankles throughout the proceedings.

Johnson was found guilty in March of shooting her mother Diane in the head as she slept, and then shooting her father through the chest as he exited the shower. She was just 16 years old at the time of the crimes.

Under Idaho law, first-degree murder carries an automatic life sentence, with a minimum of 10 years before a defendant is eligible for parole. It was up to Wood's discretion to decide whether she would ever be eligible for parole.

The judge spent more than an hour listing each piece of evidence and investigatory material that he had considered in making his decision to sentence Johnson to two life sentences plus an additional 15-year term for the use of firearms in the commission of the murders.

Wood said to Johnson he couldn't find any rational explanation why she would kill her parents. "It just escapes me," he said, noting she had several chances after she shot her mother to "stop the senselessness" before killing her father.



**DEV MUKH KHALSA/The Wood River Journal**

Sarah Johnson looks around the courtroom during her sentencing hearing Thursday. She was sentenced to life in prison without parole for the deaths of her

"You could have said, 'My God, what did I do? I'm out of here,' but that didn't happen. You proceeded further," he said.

"It's undeniable you had to look in him in the eyes when you shot him. And you shot him in the lungs. He had no chance of survival," Wood said, referring to Johnson's father, Alan.

Prior to the sentencing Bob Pangburn, Johnson's defense attorney, said he had told Sarah to "expect the worst and hope for the best."

He asked the judge to sentence Johnson to 15 years in prison, with the opportunity for parole. "What I am asking you today is not to destroy her," he said to Wood.

Blaine County Prosecuting Attorney Jim Thomas said Johnson's sentencing was not about giving the young defendant hope.

"It's about reckoning," he said. "It's not about forgiveness. That comes from a higher power."

Co-prosecutor Justin Whatcott said, "I think the time has come for this to stop being about Sarah Johnson and start being about Alan and Diane Johnson."

Johnson has continued to deny any involvement in the murders.

She was given the opportunity Thursday to address the court, and she stood and read from a prepared statement.

"I loved my parents and I love my family," Johnson said. "I am deeply grieving the loss of my parents as well as the loss of my family, my home, my friends and my community. I am thankful for the love and support of my adoptive family.

"With the guidance of the Lord and the continued love and support of those who believe in me, I hope to rebuild my life and prove that I can be a productive member of society."

Outside of the courtroom, the reaction from family members was somber, but relieved.

"It was the only thing that would satisfy their deaths," said Pat Dishman, Diane Johnson's mother and Sarah Johnson's grandmother.

"We're a strong family and a close family, and we've got a hole in it now."

In contrast, Johnson's defense attorneys were disappointed by the sentencing and said they will likely appeal.

Mark Rader, Johnson's other defense attorney, spoke with his client immediately following the sentencing and said she was terrified.

"She asked what the next legal steps were," he said. "She had known there was a possibility, and probability, that she would get this sentence. It is hard to hear that you could go to prison for the rest of your life."

Rader said Johnson will likely be sent to the women's correctional institution in Pocatello.

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