

Jury says 'not guilty' in 2007 double slaying at LSU



Advocate staff photo by CATHERINE THRELKELD -- Family and friends of Casey Gathers and Michael Lewis hug after a not guilty verdict on Monday at the 19th Judicial District Court in Baton Rouge

LSU grad students slain in 2007

By Joe Gyan Jr

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A jury's acquittal late Monday of two men in the December 2007 shooting deaths of two LSU graduate students from India at a campus apartment will mean freedom for one of the Baton Rouge men but not for the other.

An East Baton Rouge Parish jury of 11 women and two men deliberated for more than six hours before finding Casey Jermaine Gathers and Michael Jermaine Lewis not guilty in the slaying of Kiran Kumar Allam, 33, and Chandrasekhar Reddy Komma, 31, inside Allam's unit at the Edward Gay Apartments on the university's north side.

Both were charged with two counts of second-degree murder.

"He's a free man. He deserves to go home to his family," Andre Belanger, one of Gathers' attorneys, said inside the 19th Judicial District Courthouse.

Gathers, who spent several months in jail in 2008 following his 2008 arrest and has been jailed ever since his July 2011 indictment, should be released from prison in short order, Belanger said.

"Casey's innocent. We knew he was innocent. We're glad the jury found him not guilty," added Beau Brock, who also represented the 25-year-old Gathers.

Lewis, however, faces second-degree murder and other charges in the Feb. 13, 2011, shooting death of a 14-year-old boy while the boy was buying candy from a home on St. Gerard Avenue. A 17-year-old boy also was wounded in the incident. Lewis is not the alleged shooter in that case, East Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Hillar Moore III has said.

Gathers and Lewis, 24, faced mandatory sentences of life in prison if they had been convicted as charged in the LSU double-murder.

Allam, a chemistry student from Hyderabad, India, and Komma, a biology student from Kurnool, India, were found dead Dec. 13, 2007. Both men were shot in the head and one was bound. Allam's then-pregnant wife discovered the bodies.

A third defendant, Devin Jamell Parker, 24, also of Baton Rouge, pleaded guilty in June 2011 to armed robbery and accessory charges in the case and testified last week against his co-defendants. He is set to be sentenced Oct. 21.

Parker testified he was intoxicated when he, Gathers and Lewis forced the students into a small apartment, and Allam cried out for help as he tried in vain to flee before being shot to death by Gathers.

Parker told the jury he was outside the apartment when Komma was shot.

East Baton Rouge Parish Assistant District Attorney Steve Danielson told the jury in his closing arguments Monday that Parker knew details of the crimes that only someone present at the scene would have known.

For instance, Parker told his half-brother George Parker that when he and Gathers and Lewis drove out of the apartment parking lot after the murders were committed, they passed an LSU police car coming into the lot. Parker said the driver was a black man. The officer corroborated that statement, Danielson said.

"That is one of the facts Devin Parker tells George Parker before he was ever arrested, before he was ever a suspect," the prosecutor said. "How on earth do you make that up?"

Devin Parker also told his brother that two fingers on Allam's right hand were lacerated when the student tried to flee the apartment but Gathers slammed the door shut with his foot, Danielson told the jury.

"No one knew this but for the task force people," he said, referring to the multi-agency task force created to investigate the double-murder. "Devin Parker couldn't have made that up."

Brock and Jason Chatagnier, who represents Lewis, called Parker a liar, career criminal, drug addict, loner and loser whose statements to police and trial testimony cannot be trusted.

"They're dancing with the devil. When you make a deal with the devil, you will get burned," Brock argued.

Danielson countered that he's heard those allegations before in other cases.

"If you don't like the message, attack the messenger," he said.

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