



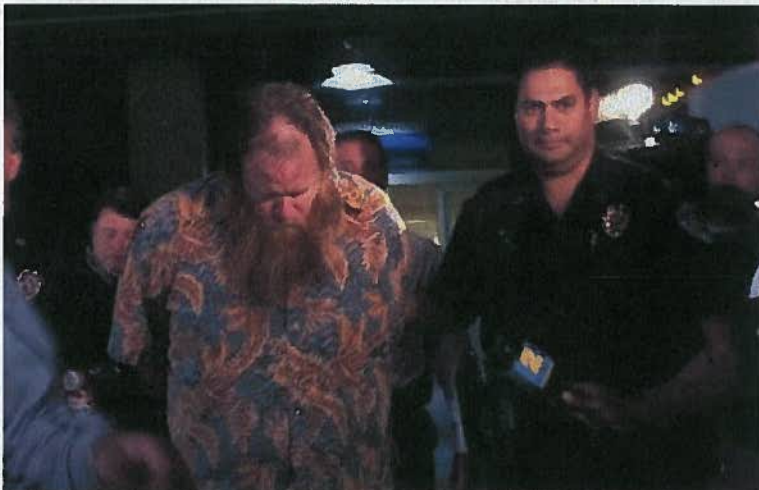
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## Jefferson Parish judge bars mentally ill killer's release from state hospital

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By **Paul Purpura, The Times-Picayune**

Almost 10 years to the day after he killed a woman with a shotgun blast inside Louis Armstrong International Airport, Patrick Gott, who was absolved of criminal liability because he is insane, asked a Jefferson Parish judge Wednesday to release him to a transitional community for the mentally ill. The judge met him half way.



Donald Stout/The Times-Picayune

Patrick Gott was escorted from Louis Armstrong International Airport on May 22, 2002, after he wounded two people with a shotgun he pulled from his sea bag. One victim died. He was ruled not guilty by reason of insanity in 2005, and on Wednesday, a judge allowed him to be moved out of maximum security at a state mental hospital.

Held in maximum security at the East Feliciana State Hospital in Jackson, Gott, 53, asked to be transferred to the Harmony Transitional Center in Baton Rouge. After hearing testimony during two hearings since March, 24th Judicial District Judge Ellen Kovach refused that request but said she had "no other choice" but to let him move to the less restrictive "secured forensic facility," on the state hospital grounds.

"I am hesitant to put Mr. Gott right away in a populous area and test him there," Kovach said, adding that she is "a big believer in baby steps."

Gott, who was escorted by uniformed men to court in shackles and business attire, appeared to be grateful nonetheless.

"Your honor, I consider your judgment a blessing, and I'd like to thank you on behalf of my family," he said in a gravelly voice. "And I want to reiterate what I told you in March, that I won't give you any reason to regret making this decision."



Patrick Gott

JPSO

A former Marine and carpenter who lived in Pensacola, Fla., Gott was ruled in May 2005 to be not guilty by reason of insanity to a charge of second-degree murder.

On May 22, 2002, he was at the Kenner airport when he pulled a shotgun from a sea bag and opened fire near the Southwest Airlines ticket counter, striking Amy Michaelson, 45, a Defense Department employee from San Diego who died days later. Two airline employees and a customer tackled Gott before he could fire a second shot. A student of Islam, Gott stoked fears in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Doctors almost immediately ruled he was insane. His competency has since been restored, largely due to bi-weekly injections he is given to control psychotic symptoms that include delusional paranoia and depression, according to testimony. A medical panel at the state hospital has found him fit to be moved from maximum security, and two doctors concluded in a court-ordered evaluation conducted May 2 that Gott has "continued his overall trend toward improvement."

"He is completely, 100-percent non-symptomatic at this point," forensic psychiatrist Richard Richoux testified Wednesday.

Seeking placement at the Harmony Transitional Center, Gott's attorney, Jim Knipe of Baton Rouge, said Gott would be closely monitored and that any "rule infraction" would be immediately reported. "This is not just a reward for good behavior," Knipe said. "This is actually a step in the right direction in the treatment for Mr. Gott."

Assistant District Attorney Ernie Chen, who had to prove "by clear and convincing evidence" that Gott would be a danger to society if released, argued Gott's competency hinges on his being medicated. The only way to test his ability to exist safely in a community would be to release him to the transitional center, Chen said. "But I don't think he's there now," he said.

Addressing Kovach, Gott counted a handful of friends he made in the state hospital who have moved to the Harmony Transitional Center. And that, he said, is where he wants to be. "That's my goal," he said.

Wednesday's hearing marked the second time in as many weeks that a Jefferson Parish judge released a criminally insane killer into less-restrictive facilities. Over the objection of prosecutor Kellie Rish, Judge Henry Sullivan released Terrence Pierre into the Harmony Transitional Center on May 9, after hearing testimony from doctors about Pierre's mental fitness.

Sullivan ruled that Pierre, 46, of Avondale, was not guilty by reason of insanity six years ago, for the Oct. 22, 2004, stabbing death of his wife, Alisha Pierre, who was killed in their Rotunda Drive home.

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